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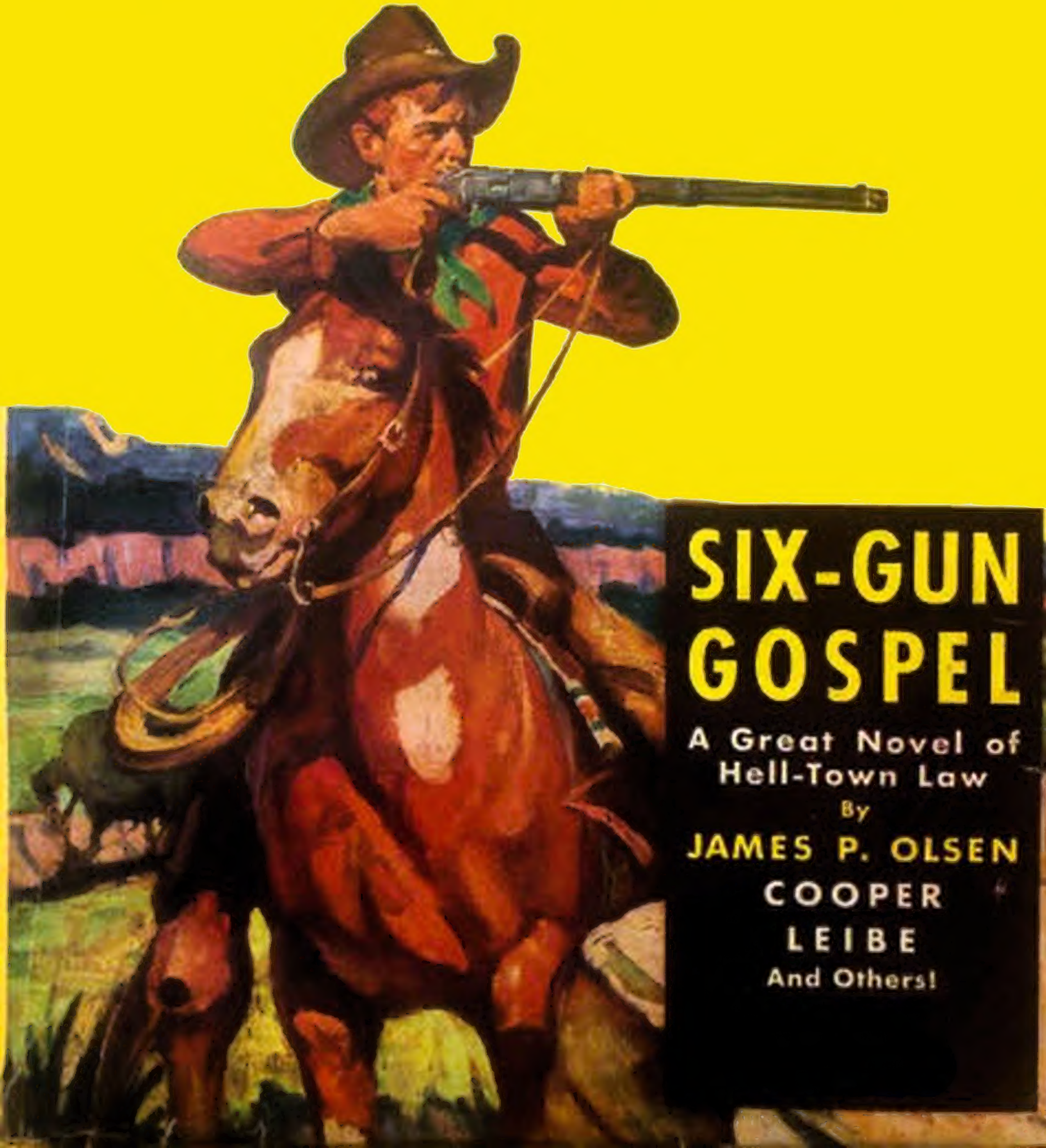

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ADVENTURERS ALL

Home, Home on the Range

I WAS born and spent the early part of my life on the edge of the Bad Lands and while there, took part in a most ridiculous performance. I laugh now when I think of it, but at the time it was exciting as well as funny.

The day of the cowboy was gone. He lived only in song and story. We, the youth of the district, atoned his departure by an imitation of the real thing, with chaps, spurs and rope. Each of us had a horse or pony, girls as well as boys, and we used to hold miniature racing meets and rodeos among ourselves. Sometimes we would hold shooting matches, if we had cartridges for our twenty-twos, but rodeos were our main sport.

Bucking horses were scarce, so we would rope a young heifer or a steer, put on a surcingle and declare as winner, the one who remained on its back for the longest time. And if you think that a young steer can't buck, let me inform you differently.

On this particular day it was hot as blazes and we met in our favourite place, a little shaded coulee that ran along a creek bottom and we lay there debating whether or not, to catch a steer and ride it. In the first place it was so hot. The heat waves danced and shimmered accompanied by blistering puffs of wind. My brother Don, who had the only rope trained horse among us, had not yet arrived, and as the herd was over in the other corner of the section, we didn't feel like taking our own horses and hazing a steer out of the herd and down to the corral in order to put a surcingle on it.

While we were waiting for Don to come rope a steer for us we heard a terrific clatter of hooves and he came tearing into the coulee, spurring Joker, his rope-trained pinto, to the limit. When he came within shouting distance he yelled, "Bear!" and we jumped to our feet, Don stopped short and told us that while taking a short-cut through the creek he had seen bear-tracks in the sand. Bears being a remnant of the Old West with which we were not well acquainted, we jumped on our horses and set off to see the tracks.

Sure enough they were bear tracks and from the position we believed the bear was still in the brush so we decided to rout

him out. We spread out in a fan, girls on one wing, boys on the other, and we started through the brush toward the open prairie; shouting at the tops of our voices, partly to scare the bear out of hiding and partly to keep up our courage. The girls seemed pretty frightened and well they might, for we had no firearms. Suddenly I heard a shout, "There he goes!" Slapping my old roan with the reins I hurried out into the open.

The bear was lumbering full speed across the grass; Don, on old Joker in close pursuit. The bear would run a few rods, then turn and try to get back into the brush. Then someone would spur his snorting horse between the bear and the trees and it would make another dash into the open.

Finally Don shouted that he was going to try and lasso it and as Joker seemed to have no fear of the bear at the time, he shook out a big loop and began swinging it around his head in the approved Bill Hart manner. Giving a final flourish to the rope he made the cast and caught the bear around the middle, Joker, trained to do this, stopped short and braced his feet.

As the rope snapped taut the bear tumbled to earth, momentarily winded.

THEN the fun began. The bear, quickly recovering, snarled, bit the rope a couple of times and started for the horse. Joker, losing his nerve, turned and bolted. At first Don tried to stop him, but glancing over his shoulder, he saw the bear still coming and began urging the horse to a greater speed. Over the grass he tore, the rest of us streaming along behind shouting advice and encouragement. I don't know what would have happened had the rope not caught on the limb of an old stump as they passed it at full gallop. Don always claimed that he tossed the slack of the rope over the limb as he passed, but I still believe it caught there of its own accord.

At any rate the rope was over the limb and, when the bear came to the stump, was hoisted straight up into the air. The shock of the sudden stop threw Don out of the saddle and he sprawled ungracefully on the ground. Getting up, he ran until he found that the bear was not still following. Joker had turned and faced the bear, then backed away till the bear was drawn right up to the limb where he hung growling and snarling, his feet working swiftly in the air as if he were still running.

We gathered around, at a safe distance of course, and began to laugh. Joker would get tired of holding the bear in the air and would slack off on the rope. When the bear came close to the ground and began to paw real dirt in Joker's direction, he would snort angrily and hoist the bear into the air again. Then he would look around in disgust. He seemed like an old man that was very indignant at having to do such work at his time of life. With his horse sense he seemed to realize more than we humans, that the rope or stump might break at any moment with serious results. He looked around at us again and his look seemed to say, "Well, why don't you do something?"

After laughing till we could laugh no more, I told my sister, who was mounted on a fast pony, to go bring dad and his 30-30, so we could have a bearskin rug. When she departed we sat down and laughed some more at Joker, now half sitting on his hunches, finding that he could hold the bear more comfortably in this position.

Then my sister came back, saying that

dad had gone out with mother. She had, however, taken the liberty of getting the rifle out of the case and had brought it and a pocketful of cartridges. It was a heavy old lever action; about all she could carry on horseback.

I didn't know just what to do. I had been allowed to handle the gun under dad's supervision, and had even loaded and unloaded it, but never had I been permitted to fire it. Deciding that this was an emergency, I elected to shoot the bear. One of the neighbour boys thought he should be the one to shoot it, because he was a bit older. But it was my father's gun and I determined to do the honours.

Loading the rifle, I tried it against my shoulder a couple of times to get the feet of it. Then making sure that no one was in the line of fire, I drew a careful bead on the bear's head and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked and the bullet cut the rope just over the bear's back. Down he came with a thump.

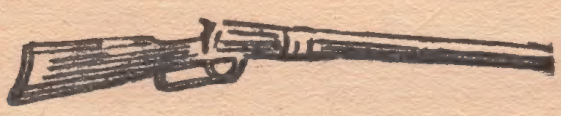
Evidently he had changed his mind about attacking, for he got to his feet and lumbered toward the brush. I was feeling relieved that he was going in another direction when the boy who had wanted to shoot the bear, snickered. I saw at once that something would have to be done about the disgraceful shooting. Pumping another cartridge into the chamber, I threw the gun to my shoulder and fired in the general direction of the bear. It obliged me by falling dead.

The voice of a little English girl first broke the silence. She sighed and said, "How sporting of you, to give it a running chance." I had never liked the girl, because she rode side-saddle which was not orthodox in that country, but now there was permanent peace between us. The only fly in the ointment was my brother.

He complained very sacastically about having his rope shot in two, "just to give it a running chance." I promised to give my rope to him and he was content to let it go at that. I was more than content.

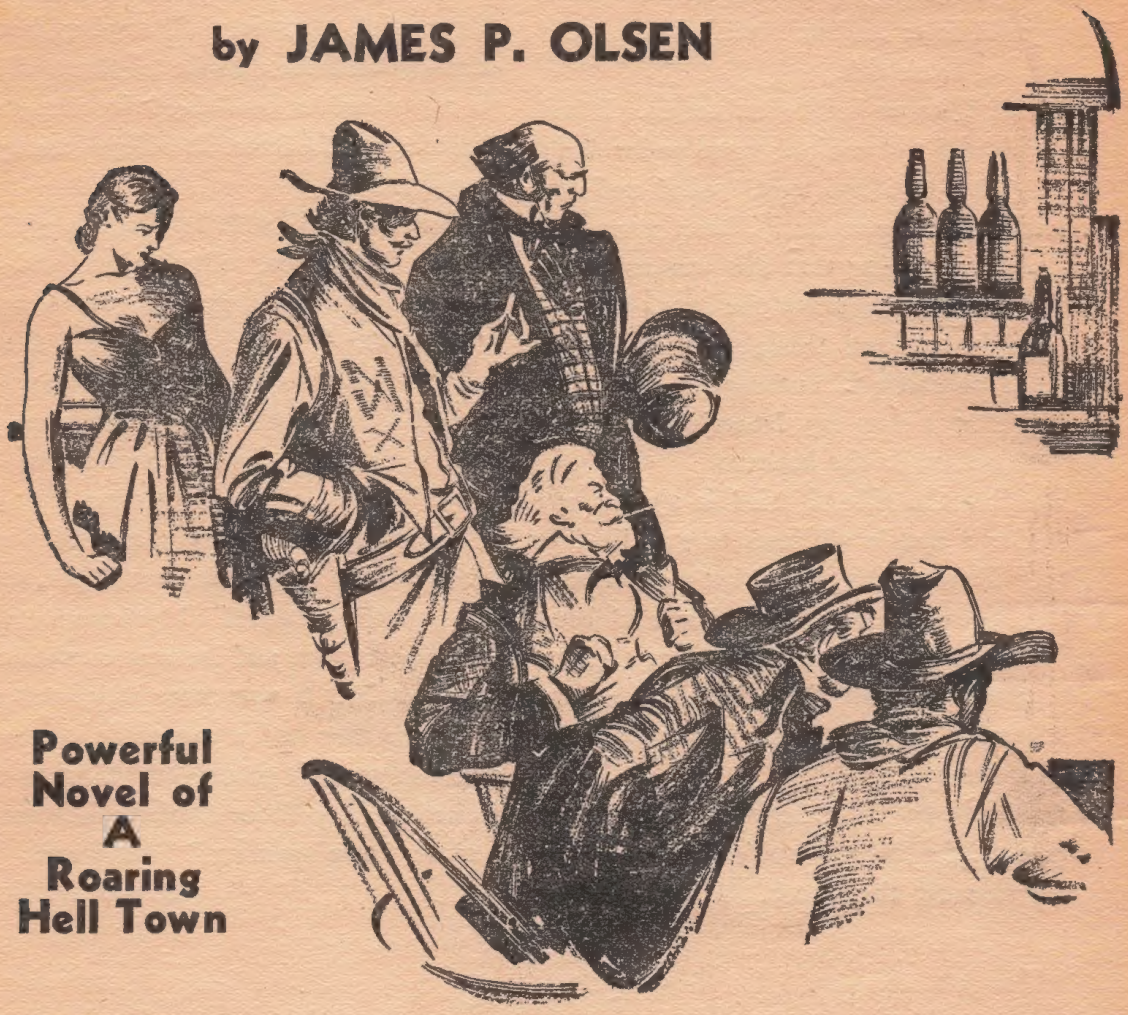
My mother had a rug made of the pelt and for years it graced our floor. I never looked at it without thinking of that day and of, "how sporting," I had been.

Robert McAmus



SIX-GUN GOSPEL

by JAMES P. OLSEN



Powerful Novel of A Roaring Hell Town

CHAPTER I
Hot Lead Welcome!

A BLOOD-RED sun sank beyond the rim of the Kansas plains, glinting on the new-laid line of railroad track that ended at the town of Twilight. Sundown. And in Twilight, sundown and sudden death were often synonymous. . . .

Texas men hitched up their guns and waited for the train that was bringing the town's new marshal, Mayo Blaze. Stop them, would he? Let him try. Mayo Blaze would find he'd bitten off a bigger chunk than he could chew.

They ruled the great cattle trails and towns, these Texas men. They'd earned the right to play. Stampedes and rustlers and camp fights had cut them down during these long trail months, heading toward railhead. They'd seen their pards die, and tomorrow, so might they. Frost and rain, dust and heat. Soaked to the skin, wetted down, dirty in dust-stiff clothes, thus had they lived. . . .

And there were nights when they dreamed of clinking glasses, the clack of chips, the soft feel of a woman's arms and lips. And a gunfighting frontier lawman with a rep was coming to stop their

With hell loose in that frontier town, and two men trying to bring peace, which would win out—John Cosmo, with his talk of brotherly love or Mayo Blaze, who wore a marshal's badge —the symbol of death?

fun? Not even an army was going to do that!

They loaded cattle, or herded them on the great bedgrounds far out of town. Then they came to Twilight and to Tex Zillo's Longhorn Bar. Zillo claimed Texas as his home, and held out a welcome hand. It didn't matter that Tex Zillo was getting wealthy selling rotten liquor. Any liquor tasted good, after the trail. No, never mind that his games were crooked, his gunmen vicious, his women rotten to the core. Let Tex Zillo grow rich and rule the roost, let Texas men play out their string the way they wished.

This evening the drinks were free. Tex Zillo was boiling up the crowd against the coming of the law. A law that could come in and make it stick. Zillo knew what it meant to him, and the stream of cowboy money flowing into the till.

A slow movement, ominous, but somewhat nonchalant, crept toward the railroad depot far down Corral Street. Past the Top Card, where big Pal Stacker, owner, leaned on his bar and watched the grim tide ease past.

A massive man, Stacker. A square man. His games and his girls were straight. He was a man of vision who knew that fun and the law can work hand-in-hand, and who hoped to see it so. Yet he was no fool. He kept his men around.

He called them to him now. Buzzard Bates, bald, big-beaked, and Ham Dance, red-nosed and pudgy. Men never laughed at this pair but once, laughed the wrong way, that is. The guns they wore were more than mere ornaments.

"Train time," Stacker told them. "Looks bad out there. Be a shame this newcomer never even got to pin on his new badge."

That was all. Stacker and these men understood each other.

THEY joined the procession, Jaundiced lights splayed out of doors and windows, spurs jingled, cigarettes winked in the dusk. Around the little depot men walked the cinder platform, or lounged in low-talking groups. Buzzard and Ham leaned against a baggage truck, and Ham nudged his companion.

"Look, you sculped left-over from a Injun raid. Wonder what John Cosmo, the pulpit-pounder, is doin' down here tonight?"

"I seem to disrecomember his gal, Miss Joyce, takin' a trip to Kansas City," Buzzard replied. "Mebbe she's due back. Be better if a sweet gal like her never come back to ol' soapy mouth, there."

They watched John Cosmo, who stood motionless and alone near the track. A tall, skinny caricature of a preacher man in rusty black clothing, whose deep eyes burned with a callous, fanatical light. His lips were thin, unforgiving lines. An odd, unbending man. . . .

"Must take guts, though," Ham observed, "to face the fun an' stuff that's poked at him. I—There she comes. Get set," he muttered as a faint headlight beam showed far down the rails.

A sudden stir of tense eagerness ran through the crowd. Men framed insults, readied their guns. Welcome, Mayo Blaze!

Mayo Blaze was ready. States, territories and the borders west and north and south, had made such known to him before.

The wild ones who lived for fight and fun alone, who damned civilization's steady flow and killed dreams of empire and future, never liked Blaze's kind. A frontier law man whose gun reputation covered a scroll that unrolled from here to hell-and-gone. Coming here to Twilight, he didn't expect to be met with open arms. . . .

The occupants of the little coach stirred. Mayo Blaze rose and smiled down at the girl with whom he'd been sitting. He'd shooed away some drunks who'd been bothering her, and they'd talked.

Mayo was a striking figure, his gray pants stuffed into high boots, un-foxed buckskin jacket, black-butted gun tied down. He was of medium build, and young. Only his dark, somber eyes showed his strength and that age-old wisdom and life-gained, gun-gained bitterness.

"I guess, Miss Cosmos, I'd best not get off with you. So I'll bid you adiosita now. Thanks for making it a pleasant trip."

Her big eyes crinkled as she gave him a tiny hand. "It has been pleasant, this talk with you," she answered. "All save—"

"Save that I come to your town with the name of a killer with a badge of authority to back me, and a ready gun. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she protested. "I just can't seem to think of you getting killed. Oh! you don't know Twilight as I do. You see, I help my father all I can. And, well, I think Twilight needs you. But not the way you come to her."

"I'll be knowing Twilight well," Blaze said softly. "And my ways of peace are permanent. No backsliding in my gospel, ma'am."

He bowed, went down the narrow aisle into the vestibule.

It would, he knew, be easy to slip off the side of the coach opposite the depot, and get to Pal Stacker's unseen. That would be an element of surprise. But surprise, he was aware, was rarely possible with the sort of men with whom he had to deal. So he lowered his warsack to the platform and saw to his gun.

HE thought of Joyce Cosmo, then chided himself for it. He thought it no use to think of her sort—and the other type did not appeal to him. There could be nothing in common between a gun-chucking lawman and the daughter of a hell-town minister.

Blaze's face grew taut and bleak as a snow-stung prairie as the train banged and wheezed to a moaning stop. He looked over the ribald jeering crowd that milled below him.

"Where's the gunslick that aims to tote a badge and stop our fun?" demanded a voice, rising above the pandemonium.

"I'm here!" Blaze snapped, "to enforce the law. Any man can have all the fun he wants. But he'll do it right."

A loud burst of laughter and disparaging remarks followed this announcement. Someone wondered if he were gunshy, and followed this with action, as a gun threatened, threading red into the needle of night. They wanted to make him rabbit. Blaze knew that but he didn't scare. More guns boomed as the crowd went loco and another slug ripped the car close to Blaze's left ear. He didn't even wince as the splinters stung his face.

He seemed to float as he leaped from the vestibule and threw his first shot before he landed catfooted on the cinder platform. He picked a man in the crowd, the one who'd fired too close to him. The man screamed, dug at one thigh, and then Mayo Blaze was a weaving, impossible target, his big gun spurting, spitting lead above their heads, at their feet. Another man pawed at a dangling arm, turned and ran. Men yelled, wheeled, ran for cover. Mayo Blaze had stopped that damned foolishness!

Too many cooks spoil the broth, Blaze had figured. Too many trigger fingers spoil gun pie.

He reached up, grabbed his warsack and cut around the depot while the crowd was yet confused. Then Buzzard and Ham came out of the whirlwind of men and fell in step alongside Blaze. Themselves, they'd bent a few heads with their gunbarrels, and admired the job.

"We're sure's hell friends," laughed Buzzard. "Hold your shootin' iron." He laughed again, as they hurried along, guiding Blaze up the street.

Behind them shouting subsided, and an ominous growling sound took its place. "Betcha they don't like 'er," Ham opined.

"That's fine." Blaze studied the pair, and was not deceived by appearances. He sort of took to them—with reservations. . . .

"Fine?" Ham echoed. "They say hell ain't half full yet. But I reckon before this's over, she's sure's hell gonna be!"

CHAPTER II
Emblem of Death

TEX ZILLO, hard-faced, a cast in his right eye adding to his sinister appearance, ran his off-center gaze down the men drinking at his bar. He took the cigar from his mouth and ground flat words between his teeth.

"He's pushed them back, time being. The boogery ones'll go at him, few at a time. He'll win. We got to move against this Blaze—move quick. Stacker, getting the feed barn man and them others on the town commission, to send for this Blaze! Damn him, if Pal Stacker thinks he can cut it over me—"

"Want me?" shrugged Chile Bruke, his cold-fish face unemotional.

"Not you!" Zillo snapped. "You ain't

Texas or trail. Send Fletch and Croadler. Set up more drinks to these wild fools off the trails. There'll be more herds come to this part of Kansas, there'll be more fool Texans. They're ours as long as Twilight is wild. We'll see it ain't tamed if we have to . . ."

Bruke, nodding thoughtfully, went off to find his men. . . . .

At the Top Draw, a small group of men sat at a table, faces turned to Mayo Blaze. Business men. The Twilight mayor and the city commission. Pal Stacker was not of the commission, but Stacker was known as square, honest, and hell when smoked. He'd been the one they'd requested to get them a marshal who could really stick, and hand it out.

They needed a man to break the reign of fear laid down by the Texas cowboys, men turned onto the town, driven by the lash of Zillo. Zillo, who beside the Longhorn Bar, owned a half dozen other smaller places which were festering spots worse than death.

Pal Stacker spoke now, addressing Mayo Blaze. "We know a place like this can't be a Sunday school," he said. "There'll be saloons, gambling, some girls. That's got to be. But let's be square with the saloons and gambling, fair to cowboys and the girls. Stop this shooting of men and lawmen. Twilight, Blaze, has had four marshals. And, save for their reps, they all seemed harder than you."

Blaze shrugged. "I've heard all that before," he said softly, his hard eyes ranging along the bar.

"A lot of Zillo's trade coming in tonight, since train time." Stacker went back to his abrupt speech again.

"Expected. And, Stacker, before I pin on your badge, I want you to know that I won't press Zillo to your favor. You'll get no favor if hell starts in here. And I'll *run* this town."

"Pick up the badge and pin it on," clipped Stacker.

THE others watched Blaze pin on that emblem that meant death. They had a hasty drink, then, and hurried out. Stacker and Blaze remained at the table, while the big man gave the new marshal the lay of things. Railroad, trail herds, wild men off the trails, outlaws. . . .

It was nothing new to Blaze. Nothing at all.

He sat, slowly twirling his glass, conscious of the many hostile eyes. At a nearby table, Buzzard and Ham and an oldster called Three-Star Jones, drank and argued heatedly. By way of stomping home his points, Three-Star thumped the floor with the tip of his peg leg.

Stacker chuckled. "Three-Star's sort of handy man for me. I give him liquor, grub, a room. Those two fools think the world of the old man, and give him money. I—what the hell they up to now?"

Three-Star had leaned his head on the table. "*'Sallri',*" he mumbled. "In minute, auger it on out—" and he began to snore.

From under his baggy cloth coat, Buzzard produced brace and bit. The Top Card—girl, gamblers, even the Zillo partisans along the bar—became quiet, watched grinningly and wondering.

Ham stealthily raised Three-Star's peg leg and Buzzard proceeded to bore a hole in the tip of it. Ham produced a caster and thrust the shank into the hole Ham had bored. They shook hands very solemnly and sat down.

Stacker, watching Mayo Blaze, was surprised to see the smile that softened his lips.

Buzzard smacked the table with a flat palm and Ham shook Three-Star. "Get up, come outta it. We'll line up at the bar an' have a quart of Three-Star," Ham called.

The result was magnificent. Hearing of his favorite brand in a quart lot, Three-Star squirted from his chair, his stupor leaving him. His weight went on the

wooden leg, and the roller got to work. Three-Star's good leg went high and he spun around. He got his foot on the floor, arms flailing, did a backward flip and came down on hands and knees.

The Top Draw rocked with hilarious sound. "Ride 'em, cowboy! He's clawin' leather—Yiiiipppppeeee!"

Three-Star didn't savvy yet. He leaped up again. The roller fairly sang and, good leg swinging for balance, Three-Star scattered men right and left on a wild ride toward the bar.

He came down on his saddle parts and sat there cussing. He saw that roller, then. "Buzzard! Ham! You misguided sons—"

Mouth open, he ceased his tirade. Blanketing silence overcame the place. Slowly, face quivering with indignation, the scarecrow figure of John Cosmo left the door and came slowly toward the bar. He stopped, hands upraised, stilling a few gibes, taunts flung at him.

"You walk in the ways of sin," he rumbled. "You disturb the peace of night. This night when I have announced prayer at the church. And do you attend, you heathen, flesh-loving spawn of Satan? Do you?" His voice rose scratchily and he ground his teeth. *"No!* You gather to abuse and make sport of an old man. You," pointing a shaking finger at Buzzard and Ham, "you vile, wild Texans."

He stood glaring at them, trembling from head to foot. A few jeers came at him, a lot of laughter he didn't heed. Here and there a man moved angrily, but others held them back. John Cosmo was a joke. He made a farce of himself. Let him alone.

A LEAN man stepped forward then, his shadow black as death.

"That's a good idea," he said. "And the parson's right. It's a hell of a place where old men is picked on. And a hell of a huddem town marshal that sits and laughs at same!"

Harsh, fight-inviting was the voice of Fletch, the man Zillo and Bruke had sent here, with Croadler, another gunman of nasty repute, to start a fight.

Sudden, ominous quiet. The long sigh of a bartender easing an indrawn breath. Little scrapings, shiftings, meaningless and unheard. Fletch, stepping out from the bar, Croadler, a few feet away, easing his hand toward his gun. And Mayo Blaze . . .

He arose and sauntered slowly toward Fletch, seemingly with the easy gaited

way of a tired man. His eyes, though, stared in a dead, cold way, his face was pinched, losing a little color, the skin seeming to draw very tight across his cheekbones. He came to a flat-footed pause.

He hated this, hated the sort of man he faced. Yet he knew what he had to do. That was his job. Talk would gain nothing, unless his own demise. Action alone would clean this town, and make it a place fit for decent men.

In a low, husky voice, he said, "Draw."

His own draw did not seem so fast, yet it was liquid-smooth and sure. And he was not fooled. His first shot caught Croadler squarely in the middle of the breastbone, knocked him against the bar, the life smashed out of him.

Cold, a machine-like thing, he did a little half dance step backward and to one side. A man behind him croaked a curse when Fletch's bullet missed Blaze and hit him along the ribs. Fletch was spun half around by the force of the heavy slug

that drilled his heart. He shook, fell soundlessly.

Men, rooted in their tracks, now moved. Pal Stack, a pair of house dealers, Buzzard and Ham, Three-Star, flung their guns. And the voice of Mayo Blaze, still unhurried but containing a stopping quality, rose up.

"You Texas men, all of you, no matter where you came from. Look at those two. Look!" He drew a slow breath. "Look how flat and useless they are. Look at the guns around you, and then at those bodies again. That's how you, you—all of you will be, you draw now, or raise hell later.

"Have your fun, but have it clean, without riot or gunshot. Ride on, then, and be welcome when you return. Draw now, or buck me late . . ."

And the sight of Fletch and Croadler, of the guns siding this strange new marshal, sickened the maddest of those men. John Cosmo, shrieking "Murderer!" at Blaze gave them their chance. They fell away and crowded silently toward the door.

CHAPTER III
Morning Parley

TWILIGHT was bedraggled in the light of early morning. A couple of puffy faced, drunken cowboys slept in the street, swampers were busy in the saloons. Within a few hours more men would come in with another herd, and those already here, with pay left to blow, would awaken and start their hell again.

Mayo Blaze, after that fight last night, had turned his back on the fanatical preacher and resumed his seat at the table. Buzzard and Ham had seen to it the bodies were removed. Pal Stacker had said nothing. There was nothing to say. The very indifference Blaze showed was enough to mute a man.

"I'll be turning in," he said. "Tiresome trip. In the morning, I'll look around the town. And probably call on Tex Zillo."

Stacker nodded. "Buzzard. Ham. I pay them to keep peace here. They can side you," he said.

"I want no such help from you, Stacker."

"You can't stop them from just being close," grunted Stacker.

Blaze left the place, conscious of eyes on him, of the cessation of talk when he passed men by. Outside, he did not take to the center of the street, nor did he dodge in shadows. Yet he was well aware of what went on around him. He rented a room at the Drover's Rest.

He slept well. No faces of dead men came to haunt him. The indifference of death and killing that he showed, was not really what he felt. He loved and desired peace, fought for it . . .

He had no regrets, and so he never thought of those whom he was forced to kill. Had no regrets until now, when he thought of the girl on the train, and the rampaging preacher, her father.

He awoke early. Dressing hastily he went down into the street, drew in great lungsful of the crisp, clean morning air. There was a hint of frost and a chill little wind rippled the prairie grasses. A fine start this town had, with the railroad and with cattle and fine range.

By the time he had eaten, a few men were abroad. A grocer stopped him with a pleasant word and a warning. Others greeted him. The grocer pointed out the boxlike structure of the one-cell jail, the cubby marshal's office just off the corner of Corral Street and a sideway known as Paradise Avenue.

The cell was empty, he found. The office, with its kitchen table desk and two chairs, was stale with the odor of liquor and tobacco smoke. Dust filmed everything. He busied himself briefly, ridding the place of these reminders of those who'd gone before him—and had died. Even, he told himself in a commonplace manner, as

he must some day go. Blaze a way, and die for it . . .

Outside again. A Texas man rode up, squinted down at Blaze, then grinned. "I aimed to stick around a spell," he vouchsafed. "But I changed my mind. I don't handle likker so well, an' I don't want to make no slips around no more. Be careful, feller. A lot of us who like things raw, may leave. A lot won't!"

"Thanks, Texas," Blaze grinned back. "I savvy. And I got no mustard in my crop against Texas men. Fact, I'm Texas, too. It isn't really *real* Texicans that's doing the worst of things."

HE strolled on, meeting folks, chatting with them, liking them. A solid, honest, decent lot, folks that would make something of the West, this town, if given half a chance. He went toward the upper end of Corral Street, and paused, squinting at the crackerbox edifice that faced him there.

As far as he knew, the county seat was a three-building town twenty miles away. Some day, Twilight would be the county seat, maybe. Now, the county seat was a place where the sheriff hid and stayed. What could this building be? His keen eyes saw a sort of cupola at the front end. A big tarnished dinner bell hung there. Then he remembered.

"The church," he mumbled and shook his head. Evidently built by hand. John Cosmo's hands. As well as the tipsy two-room dwelling at the rear.

"We got to have this out," Blaze sighed and turned toward the house. He knocked and stood waiting, hat in hand, and wondered what he'd eaten that disagreed with him. His stomach felt queer. And his heart somehow quickened at the sound of light steps coming to the door.

Joyce Cosmo stood there, hand to her slender throat when she saw who her visitor was. "Good morning, Mister Blaze," she said nervously. Beyond her, John Cosmo had risen from the breakfast table. Gently he thrust his daughter aside.

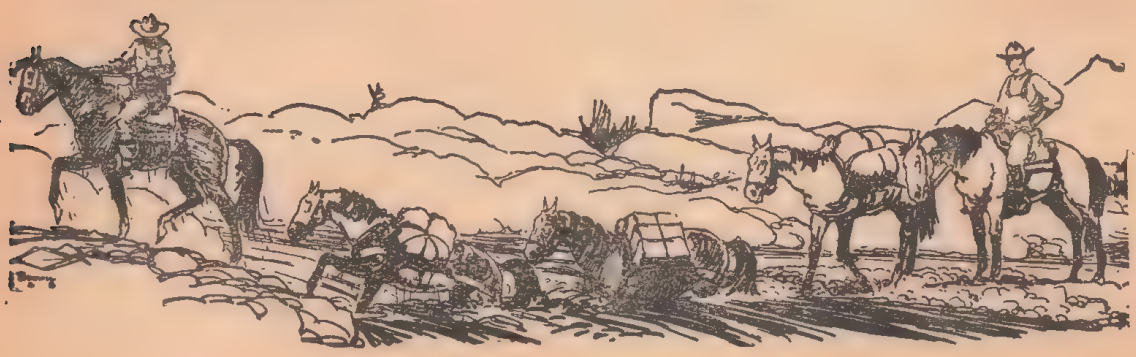
"Parson," said Blaze, beating Cosmo to the verbal draw, "I would like a talk with you. Seems we're both trying to do things for Twilight, and should get together."

Cosmo's voice seemed to gag him. "You son of Cain!" he finally managed. "You pariah dog, that trades on men's lives and drinks a Judas's toast to it. There's nothing you can have to say to me."

"Did He take that attitude?" asked the marshal quietly.

Cosmo's uplifted right hand trembled, sagged, came down. His lips moved wordlessly and he bowed his head, stepping back. And Blaze felt real pity for the man. After all it was no fault of Cosmo's that he was too fanatical, too much the zealot. The thing was too big for such a man, no matter what he tried.

Blaze looked at the girl. She managed



a smile, and her big eyes seemed to plead, "Please get along with him."

Wearily, the parson offered a chair. "What is it?" he asked heavily.

"You work for the good of folks, in your way," answered the marshal bluntly. "And I do not condemn your way. I work for good, too. Don't condemn mine. Last night you called me a murderer. I but fought in self-defense, and in defense of decency. I want your help."

"What help could I give *you?*" demanded Cosmo bitterly.

"Stay aside. Give help to those who are willing, and don't make a fool of yourself otherwise."

John Cosmo sprang to his feet, eyes blazing. "Get out!" he squalled. "Your gun may rule this town for a night or a day, but you are sin, and cannot last. Get out!"

Blaze shrugged wearily and picked his hat off the floor.

"Sin's held up pretty well, so far," he observed, not meeting Joyce's look of misery and defeated hope. "If it hadn't I wouldn't need my gun. You're a fool, John Cosmo. With these men, you don't live to turn another cheek. You're a fool, but an honest one. I'm as sorry for you as I sometimes am for myself."

BLAZE carried a picture in his mind as he walked out. Of John Cosmo, staring open-mouthed at him. Of Joyce choking back a sob . . .

He shook himself angrily and tried to put it from him, as he walked back up Corral Street. Noise of cattle in the pens. Far out on the trail, dust billowing up. Wild riders yipping down the street. Twilight was come to life for the day.

He passed the Longhorn Bar, paused, went on. It was not his way to press Tex Zillo. Let the man make trouble first. It was not up to Mayo Blaze to start things, only to finish them.

Ham Dance, yawning prodigiously, came out of a restaurant. Biting off a chew, Buzzard tailed after him. They walked along beside Blaze for a few paces, exchanging commonplaces.

"Coolish now," observed Ham. "But reckon it can get warmer. Hot as hell."

"Uh-huh," Buzzard agreed. " 'Specially when one bunch is headin' here with a herd," he squinted at the dust clouds to the south, "an' would like to get cars an' make shipment before a outfit that's now at the pens."

"An' them as is comin' in here, now, figgers maybe a old heller from Texas, which tries to run this shebang, might start a fight, they'd pitch in an' help, an' stampede the bunch as is got the cars, an' is at them loadin' pens."

"Spells Zillo to me," Blaze remarked. "Nice day. Guess I'll go down and watch them load. Things are pretty quiet today."

"Sure are," Buzzard agreed. "Bran Dalton, the feed barn man, Stacker an' a few others, they, now, got a few dollars in that herd at the loadin' pens, too. So I reckon you got no objections to me an' Ham gettin' our ol' shotguns. It'll be a fine day for ducks, if it don't, now, rain. Or is that better?"

"There's no use," Blaze warned them, hiding a smile. "There will be no trouble down there."

"Where, then?" they chorused.

"I'll maybe change my plans, and go see Mister Zillo before the day is done. Don't forget the jail has a cell in it!"

CHAPTER IV

A Coyote Howls

CHILI BRUKE and a cowboy named Rye came riding out from the herd, now held just two miles from town. They drew rein at the end pen and sat there, hats drawn low against the sun, watching the sweating men poke the dogies into the cars. A smooth-faced young

puncher dropped his prod pole and turned to them, his face gone stricken and desperate.

The straw boss crawled off the pen, walked over. Bruke sneered down at him. Rye pointed at the kid. "That's him. The one that said he was goin' to clean my plow, next time we met."

"I know who this'n is," the straw boss said of Bruke. "But who're you, feller? Ain't seen you around before."

"Why, that's a low-bellied, setter-in-the-sand, name of Rye."

Rye stiffened and looked down at Mayo Blaze, who came along between the cars, and now stood there motionlessly.

Bruke let his right hand shift forward toward his gun. A sudden, damning grimace swept Blaze's face and was gone. But it was enough to whip fear into Bruke's heart. It did not need the sight of Buzzard and Ham, now perched atop the pens, sawed-off shotguns in their hands. Bruke let his hand slip back.

"Kid," Blaze said to the young puncher, "what's up?"

"Me'n that Rye had trouble on the Pecos, year-so ago. I fist whipped him from heer to yonderly. He said he'd gun me. I said I'd fist whip him again if he didn't let me alone."

"It's a fack, Marshal," the straw-boss put in. "This Kid, he minds his own business, an' never starts no trouble."

"You been here five-six days, Kid?"

"Countin' time we held the herd out on the grass, near two weeks."

"Which makes you a real yard-wide citizen of Twilight," grinned Blaze. The Kid grinned back, and his fear of Blaze was gone. He turned back toward the mounted men, and as he turned, he drew. They rocked back in their saddles with astonishment.

"I'm arresting you for coming to threaten a respectful, peaceful citizen of Twilight!" snapped Blaze, but he was laughing inside. "Don't argue, damn you. Get a-going to the jail!"

As they turned their horses, Ham and Buzzard leaped down and spread. One went up one side the street, one the other. Their shotguns were well displayed.

"Wait'll Zillo hears of this," snarled Bruke.

"Zillo fixed this," Blaze hoorawed, walking along behind them as they started up the street. "He aimed for you to start trouble to ring me in. That would get this new trail bunch on the peck. Hell! Nobody would be fool enough to try to stampede a herd and take these cattle cars. That's railroad stuff. But Mister Tex Zillo didn't figure the jail angle. Or did he, now?"

Men were pouring out of saloons and other places of business. Girls looked out from windows of second floors of two-storied buildings. And for every step he took, driving those two before him, Blaze's stock went up a point. Chili Bruke, Zillo's right-hand hombre, going to jail as meek as a little lamb! And a hard gent from the incoming herd along with him!

WATCHING to see that no ambitious fool took a shot, Ham and Buzzard went quietly apace along the walks. A low murmur, and then laughter, such as that sullen street had never heard, ran and roared sky-high. Men jeered advice to Blaze, hoorawed the prisoners. And many men found themselves grudgingly respecting Blaze. Some enjoyed the joke and others anticipated the repercussion . . .

At the jail, while the crowds gathered in the street, Blaze left the door open that the mob might see him search the men, shove them through the cell door that opened into the little office, and lock them in. Questions were hurled at Blaze. They wanted to know what he aimed to do with the pair?

Blaze just stared frozen-faced at them, struggling to keep from laughing aloud.

Yet he knew the aftermath would be nothing to hold laughingly nor lightly.

The roaring crowd suddenly split back to form a lane, which closed behind Tex Zillo as fast as he came through. Zillo, his bad eye gleaming, his face twisted, came right on into the jail.

Mayo Blaze, sitting on the kitchen table desk, swung one foot, held up his cigaret and blew the ash from it. "Something *you* want?" he said with deadly implication.

"You got a man of mine locked up here!" Zillo roared.

Blaze snapped down the cigarette, stood up. "And who, my saddle-galled friend, in the hell are you?"

"I'm Tex Zillo," he snarled. "And I see your play. You were hired by Stacker, so Stacker could control, and fleece, the Texas men. You got nothing on Bruke and Rye—"

"So that's the howl you beller—about Stacker," Blaze sniffed. "And I've nothing on those two? Well," he thrust his face toward Zillo and wrinkled his nose, "they're in jail, ain't they? And the charge is disturbing peace and threat to do bodily harm. The fine'll be about one *hundred* bucks apiece!"

"That's more'n double what—"

"You argue with me, I'll throw *you* in."

Zillo's caution whipped away before his wrath.

"Damn you," he squalled. "If it wasn't for that badge—"

"Look back at that cell, Zillo," Blaze commanded. And when Zillo complied, Blaze chuckled goadingly. "Now look at this."

Zillo's breath hissed when he swung back, and stared at the muzzle of Blaze's gun. Blaze stepped forward. Zillo retreated. "Drop your hardware," Blaze growled. "That hide-out under your arm. Now shake down that derringer. How'd I know? Your kind always carries a sneak up their sleeve."

The guns thumped to the floor. Blaze called to those that jammed the street outside, and it seemed all Twilight was there. "Men, there's a lot of you got your eyes open right now. I'm depending on you to see I get fair play. I'm going to play Mr. Zillo double or nothing. If I beat hell out of him, and I will, he pays double those fines. If I don't, I loose those men. Zillo get outside."

"Why, you loco fool!" A wolfish smile lit Zillo's face. He measured his own height, weight, reach against that of Blaze, and knew what advantage was his. A quick motion, and Blaze took off badge and gun. Followed Zillo out. Unarmed, the street packed with a few friends, a lot of men who hated law. Again Blaze's stock was on the rise.

A HUGE circle formed there in the street, gone oddly quiet. Tex Zillo spun, lashed out. Mayo Blaze tried to duck. Failed. He went sprawling in the dust, and Zillo came rushing, swinging as Blaze came up. Blaze stepped aside, crashed his fist to Zillo's left ear. It made a soggy sound, and blood ran down Zillo's neck.

There was no panic, no hurry to Mayo Blaze. He took blows that spun and staggered him, and his implacable expression and manner never once changed. His lips were cut, blood streamed from his nose, yet he never altered his relentless pace.

Zillo bored in again. Piston rights and lefts found his face. Blaze saw the man's mouth open, saw him choke in the thick cloud of dust they stirred up. He put hard blows to Zillo's stomach, doubled him, smashed that pulped ear again. When Zillo croaked despairingly and flung a hand to his ear, the sound of Blaze's blows to Zillo's face made more than one man sick.

Shirt torn to rags, face ripped by a ring Zillo had worn, Mayo Blaze swayed a bit above the face-down Zillo, there in the blood-dampened dust. He drew in a great breath, his head came up, his eyes

swept the silent throng. Sullen men moved slowly away, some smiled in a friendly way. There were no cries of approbation. There was something too threatening, too warning in Blaze's attitude.

He stopped, now, jerked Zillo to his feet. "Those fines!"

Zillo fumbled groggily and produced gold coins. He started to fling them in the dust, caught the set of Blaze's jaw, handed them over.

"You've had your show," he croaked, low-voiced. "But I'll have mine. You're right, Mister Marshal. There's better ways than my *own* gun cutting into your string."

He turned and staggered from there and Blaze went back into the jail. In a moment, Bruke and Rye, one sullen, vicious, the other one cringing, came out. Their guns sailed out after them. "Use them now?" jeered Mayo Blaze.

"When the sign's right!" Bruke rapped.

"That sign'll be blood on the moon," was Blaze's answer.

CHAPTER V
The Shot In The Dusk

IT was late afternoon when Mayo Blaze, washed, his cuts and bruises treated, walked down Corral Street, a vague unrest assailing him. He went easily along the boardwalk, aware of the sullen air that wrapped the town. "They don't know if they like it, or hate it," Blaze told himself, turning in at the Top Draw.

Three-Star paused, mop in hand, and greeted him warmly. "I'm damn glad you circulate, Marshal," he said enthusiastically. "Hope you romp the boots off them hellions, Ham and Buzzard."

Blaze chuckled and went back to sit at a table with Pal Stacker, who'd just gotten

"You're a strange man, Mayo Blaze," said Joyce. "You fight, you court death, and still you see beauty in the dying day . . ."

up and was having his first drink of the day. Stacker nodded toward the bottle. Blaze poured one very, very small.

"You didn't come out none too well," Stacker said, meaning Blaze's face. "Whyn't you kill Zillo? Huh?"

"A bald or begged shooting would sicken the decent ones, Stacker. I've got them coming at me, and the decent ones, the ones on the fence, are seeing it. A marshal can't go after trouble until it makes itself."

"You're just using yourself for bait. Blood bait, Blaze."

"Perhaps. Not the first time, though."

"Well, Zillo lost a lot of face, more ways than one. Here's how to it." They drank. And Stacker said, "If you succeed, Blaze, it'll be a fine thing. I own land here. I'd be the first to move my place down across the railroad tracks. Keep our gambling and what hell is needed in one section. And controlled."

"That's okay, Stacker. The boys have got to have *some* fun."

"And I'd be the first to yell for the county seat moved here. The seat now, is just a joke. So is the sheriff. I'd like to see you with that job. This town has a broad future ahead."

"Yeah." Blaze was impatient. "But the time at hand counts—"

HE started in his chair. Joyce Cosmo came in, drawing quick but respectful glances from the men along the bar. She smiled at Stacker, and her eyes met, held with Blaze's. She nodded, went around the tables and up a flight of stairs to rooms above.

A rigid fury lining his face, Blaze snarled "What's she doing? What you let her go up there for, Stacker? Damn you—"

"Easy," cautioned Stacker. He eyed Blaze in a slow, wondering way, and said "Ah-huh" to himself. "Blaze that girl is fine. And in some ways, John Cosmo is. Cosmo helps all he can. There's a girl, Rita, dying upstairs. Miss Joyce goes to sit with her, nurse her all she can. There ain't a girl in Twilight don't swear by her."

Blaze nodded. He sat there a long time, while the sun sank outside and the shadows fell. The girl came down, went out. Slowly, Blaze arose. He followed her at a distance, and his mind was not alert to enemies. He was fortunate no one jumped him then.

The girl went by the tipsy looking church, beyond the piles of trash and cans that marked the Twilight limits, and on to where a line of high sunflower stalks and willows marked a wet-weather branch. She was out of sight of Twilight, over a little rise. She sat down, hugging her knees, head thrown back and looked at the crimson and purple horizon.

A meadowlark sang liquid notes of farewell to day. Far off, a held herd bawled low. A star twinkled in the sky.

"It's so peaceful, and so beautiful—it hurts," Blaze said softly. It did not startle her. She turned her head, and did not seem surprised that he followed her. Yet she seemed puzzled that he could appreciate the scene.

"You're a strange man, Mayo Blaze," she said, nodding her permission that he might sit down near her.

"Why?" He leaned on one elbow so he could see her face.

"Why? That's hard to put to words. You think of others, and yet you kill. You admit the need of a man of God, yet champion the use of guns. You fight, you court death, and yet see beauty in a dying day . . ."

He was silent. "I admit my father is wrong," she went on. "He fights too hard, and it drives him frantic that he fails."

"Has he?" Blaze demanded, looking squarely at her. She blushed, but brushed this aside.

"Yet I think you not so hard, so merciless as you seem. All ready, many decent men speak well of you, and like you so well as to fear for you. Of course, my

father wouldn't listen to that. They've driven him to the point he wouldn't hear. He goes mad at the thought of killing, you see."

Blaze shrugged. "What do you want of life?" she suddenly demanded.

He reached, touched one little hand. She did not move it. "I want," he said, as though reading dreams in the clouds, "a home. I want respect. I want to do my share in making this the sort of country it ought to be. There are men who stand in the way. I, like your father, am a missionary. Of course you never saw me in that light, but it's true. Missionaries like myself must preach one sort of gospel—gun gospel. It has to be, so missionaries like your father can follow us."

"I—I do see it, Mayo Blaze," she whispered.

They sat there, hands touching, not needing words. The color faded from the sky. Deep dusk came down. The girl stirred to arise, just as the flat snap of a rifle shot whipped the silences.

THE snarling drone of the bullet broke between their heads and the slug wailed on. Joyce Cosmo's hair jerked and a few strands of it fluttered down. As he thrust Joyce flat and rolled on his stomach, the flaming truth ran in Blaze's brain. That bullet hadn't been meant for himself, but for Joyce! It had whipped her hair as she moved her head.

He searched the gloom with frantic eyes. A hundred yards back toward town, red flames stabbed the dark. Three guns beat, yet no lead came toward Blaze or Joyce. He held his fire. The smash of pistols, of the rifle, ceased. A few seconds, and Buzzard Bate's low voice came to them.

"No more pistol work, Ham. Ain't any, now, profit in usin' lead on a dead man, is there?"

Blaze helped the trembling girl to her feet. She clung to him when they started toward Stacker's handy men. "To think you must always be in such danger," Joyce sobbed.

Blaze didn't tell her he was certain that shot was meant for her. He stopped her and went on to where Ham and Buzzard knelt, rolling a body over.

"Thanks, boys," Blaze said, tense-voiced.

"She's all right," growled Buzzard. "I reckon the joke's on Rye. We follered him when he was follerin' you."

Blaze bent lower, peered hard at a set, dead mask of a face. Yes, it was Rye; Rye, riding with a Texas herd now held outside of town. But Rye, also, who had taken orders from Zillo.

'We'll all walk home with Miss Cosmo, boys," Blaze said. "Then we'll go make medicine. That shot wasn't meant for me, but for the girl. Why? I can't say why. But before this night is over, I bet we learn."

He took Joyce's arm. Buzzard and Ham, not bantering, not don't-give-a-damn now, followed at a distance.

Blaze stopped before the church. "I—I'll see you. Stay inside tonight," he said.

"Wait." She flung her arms around his neck, kissed him once, then fled, crying back to him, "Preach the gospel in your own way, Mayo Blaze. I'll pray for you."

"I'll maybe need it," Blaze muttered to himself as the trio went on down Corral Street. He was worried for one of the very few times in his life.

"Send somebody back for Rye's body," Blaze ordered absently as they turned into the Top Draw. Buzzard nodded.

Blaze went back to sit at a table and wait for Stacker, and Buzzard and Ham to join him. The man they'd sent for Rye's body came back, swearing at them for fooling him. "You knowed damn well they wasn't no body there!" he accused.

Blaze had no time to ponder this for just then Stacker came bolting in.

"Blaze, you fool!" he cried. "I don't know what to say. John Cosmo is on his

way here now, and swears he'll kill you with his own two hands!"

CHAPTER VI
The Other Cheek

HANDS slapped loudly on the batwing doors up front and the tall form of John Cosmo came into the room. His old flat-crowned hat was askew, his stringy hair hanging from under it, his black tie was unknotted and flapping from his collar. His angular face twitched and his mouth was a thin scimitar line of rage. Long strides carried him back to Mayo Blaze, who couldn't understand what this was all about.

He arose quietly, hands on his hips. Cosmo stopped and raised both hands high, as though to call down lightning to strike Blaze dead.

"You—you—" He choked, gasped for breath. "You're not only a killer," he cried. "You turn the hands of all men against you, so they are forced to hunt you like the dog you are."

Blaze went white as he fought to control himself. He must remember this man was aging, and that he was Joyce's father.

"And then you are so low you walk with my daughter beyond the town, endangering her life," went on the parson. "No decent man would do that. The worst man in this accursed town would not offer her that insult."

Among the men in the Top Draw, there were mutterings and beginning of angry looks. Blaze did not blame them. He knew how they felt about Joyce Cosmo.

"Miss Joyce tell you this?" demanded Blaze in a low, quivering voice.

"No! But I know. And I'll use it as my weapon against you. I thought of violence but I am not a violent man. But I shall use that against you, I tell you—" His voice broke, and John Cosmo turned and almost ran from the room. Buzzard started to stop him, then desisted when Blaze shook his head.

"It would do no good to talk to him," Blaze muttered as Buzzard, Ham and Stacker gathered around the table. "He wouldn't believe because he doesn't want to."

"It's hell," Stacker complained. "It finishes you, Blaze. Even those who've been coming over to your side, are going to be against you now. I—I reckon it'd be best you left Twilight."

"With men saying I endangered that girl? Saying I ran like a whipped cur! Damned if I do. Look. Rye's body is gone. Somebody saw me following Miss Cosmo beyond town, and cooked it up to send Rye to try to shoot her. God! If Rye'd got her, think where I'd be sitting in folks opinions now, not that it'd make a damn with her gone.

"Anyhow, they got Rye's body. And it's a cinch it was Zillo or Bruke that told Cosmo. Topping that for trouble, is the fact that Rye rode with that Texas bunch out there. Even if they had no use for him, they'll be determined to even the score. And Cosmo isn't going to help me any, spreading his face all over town."

HE lowered his chin, lost in thought. The rest were nervously silent. Three-Star Jones, who'd been mopping up tables nearby, slipped out the back way. He circled and came back to Corral Street. In front of another saloon, John Cosmo was shouting against the marshal, and leading up to his point before an increasing audience.

Three-Star was in the good graces of John Cosmo. He'd been to church on several occasions. The fact that he had been barrel house once, and had slept through another sermon did not damage the fact of his attendance in Cosmo's eyes.

Three-Star tugged Cosmo's sleeve, and after some difficulty got him aside. "Parson," he said earnestly, "you got to listen.

Stacker, Ham an' Buzzard, they been awful good to me. An' the marshal is the right sort, too. Listen, Parson, nobody knew Rye was dead, or anybody shot at, but Blaze an' them other two. Outside the person that told you. How'd they know so quick?"

There was more of this, before Cosmo, gravely thoughtful, said, "That may be so. It does not excuse Blaze. I shall go to the man who told me of this and demand an explanation at once!"

He turned away. Three-Star clucked commiseratingly and stumped back down the street. Odors of food from a beanery reminded him of the inner man. Stacker stood his credit in this place. Three-Star went in. Already, even in here, men were growling, cursing Blaze for all sorts of things in connection with Joyce Cosmo.

Up at the Longhorn Bar, John Cosmo approached Zillo and Bruke. "So as soon as Rye's body gets out to them wild sons with that herd, and they hear that Blaze and the Stacker bunch killed him, they're going to come fanning in," Zillo said hurriedly, then turned toward Cosmo.

"I'm demanding to know how you knew about—" began Cosmo.

Zillo knew what was coming. He jerked his head and Chile Bruke stepped in, swinging a heavy fist. It caught John Cosmo high on the right cheek and dropped him. Grunting, he scrambled to his feet. "Three-Star was right," he mumbled stupidly.

"Three-Star, eh?" Zillo snarled. "So you'll listen to that old son? Go ahead, Bruke."

Bruke swung again, and blood jumped out of a cut over Cosmo's left cheekbone. He hit the floor again, dimly realized he was hauled to the door and kicked into the street. Men roared their laughter all around him as, bloody and dirty, he got up and wobbled away.

"The other cheek, the other cheek," he droned over and over.

"Watch close," Zillo snapped. "That damned peg-legged old bum, Jones, he's the kind Cosmo'll listen to. It might be a good idea if Three-Star was out of the way."

BRUKE shrugged and went out. He went quickly down and stood a little way from the front of the Top Draw, peering inside when the doors swung. He was standing there when he saw Three-Star coming from the restaurant. Bruke moved swiftly, and met the old man at the mouth

of a narrow little alley between restaurant and saloon.

Bruke's left hand shut on Three-Star's arm, swung him into the dark, narrow way. Bruke's gun pressed hard against Three-Star and gave off a muffled sound. All so suddenly, nobody had noticed. And muffled gunsound was not even worth passing notice in Twilight.

Bruke went on through the alleyway, leaving Three-Star huddled there. . . .

He had more news for Zillo. Looking through the swinging doors of the Top Draw, he had seen the city council gathering around a table in the rear. One way or another, it looked like the end for Mayo Blaze.

And so it did. In the Top Draw, Dalton, the feed man and spokesman, slowly shook his head. "Blaze, the decent element is running against you. We can believe your story. But how many others will? They're always ready to turn against and think the worst of a gunman marshal. If we stand back of you, we'll all be wiped out."

Bleak-faced, Blaze stood up, tossed off a drink, stared around the little circle.

"You can have your damned tin badge. But you can't make me run. I'll finish what I set out to, or die trying. To hell with this pie-tin authority."

He reached for the badge pinned on his jacket.

"Ahhh, Buzzard. Ham. Stacker."

They turned. The back of the Top Draw was given over to a storeroom. From the storeroom, a door ran out to face the prairie at the rear. A crawling, bloody figure came dragging from the storeroom door now, gasping, reaching toward them piteously.

"Three-Star!" Buzzard cried, running over and kneeling. The others gathered around him. "It was Bruke," Three-Star gasped. "He shot me, because I told Cosmo a few. Guess Cosmo told him I talked to him. Bruke thought—I was—dead."

Three-Star shuddered, and then was still.

Then into the silence that held this place came the bloody, beaten man who was John Cosmo. He weaved back and forth, looked down. Buzzard rose, hands held clawlike. He made a terrible fight of it, keeping from throttling John Cosmo.

"You—you psalm singin' ol' son," Buzzard choked. "Look what you, an' all your preachin' done! Three-Star's dead. You've butted in where you done harm instead of good. You never could stick to your own side this deal. Damn you, I say! An' when I start gettin' even for Three-Star, you can start prayin' again. This damn town's gonna run red tonight!"

Cosmo swayed, fists clenched at his sides. "I have turned the other cheek," he quavered. "And I see the light. Whatever I may do to atone, I shall."

Mayo Blaze spoke up. "You can help. You can talk to the decent people. You can explain to them the time has come to fight. Buzzard's right. This town's going to run red. Another day, and Twilight will be a fit place for a preacher, or not good enough for the Devil himself."

CHAPTER VII
The Narrowing Circle

TWILIGHT went "ghost" with a rapidity that was startling. Going warily up the street, Mayo Blaze might have walked through a town vacated for a score or more of years. No lights shone in windows, nobody showed on the street. A cold wind ruffled the dust and made whispery sounds.

Dull light did come from the Longhorn bar, and as Blaze approached, a lash of gunflame shredded out at him. He threw himself flat, rolled, gained deeper shadows and got up.

"Bruke. Come out of there. I'm arresting you for the mur—"

More gunsound, more lead that came to seek him out.

"All of you!" Blaze called out. "I'm warning you now. Break it up in there, or take the consequence."

Silence. He turned and went back down the street to the Top Draw. "It's like I thought," he told Stacker. "And just as well. The whole wild bunch of them is forted up in there."

The Top Draw itself presented an ominous scene. The house men, the bartenders, were fully armed. Slowly, one at a time, men came in, received instructions, went out again. These were the merchants, the decent element of the town. A few cowboys, drifters, aligned themselves with this faction, some because of past real and fancied wrongs committed against them by Zillo's men, some just for the hell of it.

Midnight. Mayo Blaze shook himself wearily and looked around. "This is going to be—hell," he muttered. "It makes me feel like I've fallen down on my job."

Stacker laid a carbine on the bar and took a long drink. "Might not be any of this branch water in hell," he grinned. "Shucks, Blaze, you've done more than

anybody ever figured. Tonight it just headed up, side for side."

"John Cosmo hasn't hurt us, going around telling his story," Dalton, the feed man, said. "You send him home?"

"Yeah," Blaze answered. "He'll be safe, with Miss Joyce there. And like as not, there'll be work for them. Plenty work."

He tossed aside his cigarette, hitched at his belt, drew his gun. "Let's go," he said, "you men that's to stay here and guard this place, watch sharp."

He eased out the back way, with Stacker, Ham and Buzzard. They fanned out, going carefully up the street. A gun cracked and a man yelled. It was the signal for death to take the saddle and ride with unwrapped spurs.

All up and down Corral Street, shots thundered, lead screamed back and forth. From the tops of buildings, from alleyways, from windows and doors, concealed men slung lead.

Zillo, too, had spread out his forces, placing men in concealment as Blaze had done. It wasn't a concerted rush or drive. Hidden marksman sought out hidden marksman in the dark.

BLAZE ducked as lead slammed by him, wheeled sped shots at a little barber shop across the way. The thunderous boom of shotguns in the hands of Ham and Buzzard blared out. The front of the barber shop was shattered. A man screamed. From a half dozen points, lead lashed at them as they ducked for safety.

Above them, two men came together, hitting with empty guns. They fell apart, went down as guns from both sides opened up. A body slid from the top of a town lot office and made a sickening sound on the walk.

A dark figure dashed across the street toward the feed store. Dalton's men in there cut him down, breaking him at the hips. Another man followed him, and he too went down. Blaze hunkered while a blast of lead ran out of a restaurant, and when a hidden marksman leaned, the marshal's gun slashed savagely. The man swayed, fell across the walk.

There was nothing frantic about this. The firing was not a continuous thing, but sporadic, deadly. Men circled in the dark, clambered over buildings, moved for positions of advantage. Then their guns would rap, and someone would die.

An hour. Two hours. Men lay still in death in the street, on top of buildings. Others stifled their groans that their positions might not be given away. The burst of gunfire became less frequent now. And slowly, slowly, the force of men under Mayo Blaze narrowed a circle until they swept all inside of it and surrounded the Longhorn Bar.

Hunkered behind a watering trough fifty yards from the front of the Longhorn, Blaze cussed nervously. "Stacker, there's something wrong. They'd busted through and run, a lot of them, before they'd let us drive them back in there. It don't look good."

"It don't," admitted Stacker, relieving his feelings by driving two shots at the Longhorn.

The night wore on. The firing from the Longhorn, from the men circling it, was desultory, meaningless. The deep dark before dawn came down. Two men tried to sneak out of the Longhorn, and went down instantly. No more tried that.

A gray streak feathered the east. Crouched behind the trough, Blaze cussed angrily. He couldn't ask these men to rush that place. All he could do was wait.

He moved, listening. Stacker heard the same, and from nearby, Buzzard called out for them to listen.

"Riders coming, fast," Blaze grunted. "What the hell?"

The beat of hoofs came on rapidly. The dim, eerie light gave shape, then, to a body of men riding from the south. They

came together, streamed onto Corral Street, guns drawn, and rode for the Top Draw.

Two dozen of them in the gruesome dawn, they were silent, grim.

"Men from the herd," Blaze snapped. He crabbed backward, got the corner of a building between himself and the Longhorn, stood up and out into the path of that group of men.

"Far enough!" he barked. He recognized the trail foreman, the leader of these men, as they drew quick rein.

"You, Ventres," he called. "You wasn't coming in this time of morning, to sort of take us by surprise?"

Ventres, making a motion to the men behind him, glared at Blaze. He looked at the still forms in the street.

"DID you promise Zillo help? Or did he just send you Rye's body, Ventres?" Blaze demanded.

"By God they just brought the body! That was enough. No damned killer with a badge can murder one of my men and expect us to let 'er lay."

"Rye was Zillo's pup, Ventres. Rye was killed when he shot at a woman."

"That's a damn lie—"

"Don't say that!" Buzzard called. "Maybe you Texas men do lean to Zillo when you come up the trail. A lot don't. Some do. But Rye *did* shoot at a woman, an' me an' my pard got him."

"If that's so, where's this woman?" Ventres snarled.

"Send one of your men to the church. Ask Joyce Cosmo."

"Hell, yes. Shorty, ride to the church."

"You'd best believe it, Ventres. There's men all around you. Your friends are holed up in the Longhorn."

"Don't try to scare us," Ventres snarled. "We're in among you. We can tear you apart and get help from those inside."

"They figured on that. Why don't you let them pull their own chestnuts out of the fire?"

From the Longhorn came a loud hail. Bruke's voice. "Hey, Ventres. We can't see you from here. What the hell—"

"We're here," Ventres called back. "Hold on."

"And we're here," Blaze yelled. "Men, bead yourself a man. If they break over, give them what."

"That won't help you," warned Ventres.

"It won't," Blaze admitted, voice matter-of-fact.

"He don't look like no back-shooter to me," one of the riders growled with subdued admiration for this man who faced the lot of them—and faced certain death as well.

Ventres remained silent. The man he'd sent to the church, came back. "She's a mess, boss. They's a dozen men at that place, bein' tended by a gal an' a preacher. Some Texas men, too, who're cussin' themselves for listenin' to Zillo. That gal, an' I'd believe anything she said, said Rye's slug clipped her hair."

"Scatter, men," Ventres clipped. "Get your horses out the way. We come here for a fight, and maybe we'll get it. But we'll be siding the law this spell." He glared at Blaze. "And I suppose when it's over, we won't be able to drink, or dance, or nothing else."

"Anything you want," Blaze assured him. "As long as you leave off guns. When this's over, a gun law goes into effect. But it ain't over yet," he added, softly.

CHAPTER VIII
Six-Gun Gospel

WITH Blaze and Stacker, Ventres went back of the buildings across the street from the Longhorn Bar, came in the rear of a small grocery store and worked along to the shattered front of the place. A man lay behind the counter, sightless eyes set toward the ceiling.

Crouched low, Ventres cupped his hands about his mouth. "The Longhorn!" he called. Zillo's voice replied.

"Ventres? Where the hell are you? What's wrong?"

"We ain't cutting your strays for you," Ventres bawled. "You, Texas men in there. Listen. Zillo—"

He told them of Rye and the shot at Joyce Cosmo, yelling the truth so they believed it, truth Blaze and the others could not have made them believe. Zillo and Bruke, cursing, tried to shout Ventres down. Panic tinged their voices.

"Shut up!" someone inside the Longhorn barked at them.

"You'd best come out and go about your business," Ventres warned. "Biggs, Jackson—" to a pair of his own riders he knew, "the rest of the boys are throwing in with me. Don't be fools."

There was a long silence and the first faint rays of the sun reddened the scene. Then a man in the Longhorn called out.

"That's shore fine, Ventres. Makes us see what a pack o' fools we bin. But we ain't skunks. We ain't handin' Zillo and Bruke over to no law. Why don't this hell-on-wheels lawman kill his own snakes?"

Ventres and Stacker heard Blaze's harsh chuckle.

"I will, cowboy," he yelled. "I'll meet them out in the street, right now. They can take it, or go to jail."

Silence. That Texican voice again: "A'right. But what's it get them if they down you?"

"A chance to run for it, I guess. I can't promise any more."

"Fair enough. You oughta see them in here. Beggin' an' mewin' around enough to make a gent plumb sick. Come out, Mister Tin Badge. We'll h'ist them out the front way, an' let 'er buck."

"You fool," Stacker ground at Blaze. "Against the pair, you go no chance."

"It's my job," said Blaze coldly. He let his gun arm, gun in his hand, hang straight down at his side, stepped out into the street.

There was a breathless hush, like a mighty hand pressing down on the town. The rising sun sent blood-red shadows flicking here and there. Straight, dead-faced Blaze stood at the edge of the walk —waiting.

The door of the Longhorn slammed open. Guns drawn, Bruke and Zillo leaped out, split, one going to right, the other left. Their guns pounded, pounded, pounded.

IT seemed as though Blaze waited far too long. He raised his six-gun, almost as though to aim, let the hammer fall. Bruke broke in mid-stride, his knees buckled forward, his chin snapped against his chest and he bent backward at the waist. He hit the dust and skidded limply as Mayo Blaze spun completely around and fell full length.

In his hiding place up the street, Buzbard lowered his shotgun. "If it hadn't been Bruke he got," he ground out, "I'd had to got the skunk myself. For Three-Star, nohow."

Zillo was running like the wind toward the end of the street. There in the dust, Mayo Blaze struggled, pushed himself to a sitting position, raised his gun. He yelled. Zillo spun, fired. A trailer of dust swooped up near Blaze as the shot sped wide. Blaze's gun gave roaring echo.

Zillo staggered, sat down. Sitting there, there guns raised, they emptied their weapons as fast as they could thumb the hammers back and let them fall.

Silence. They sat and stared. It seemed ages. Zillo coughed, gave a jerky cry, fell backward. He shuddered only once.

Blaze ground his teeth, pushed hard against the ground, and gained his feet! Men were rushing at him, mouths open as they yelled. Seemed he couldn't hear them. They took on odd, wavering shapes.

"Don't forget to check your guns, ran-

nies," Blaze mumbled, and they caught him as he fell.

The sun was high when he opened his eyes. He could hear the bawls of cattle, could hear wild, shrill yells in the street. But no sound of shots. He grinned weakly. The boys could have their fun, their drinks, their cards and company. Still Twilight would be a place where a decent man dared bring his family.

Another milepost of civilization had been set . . .

He turned his head. Ah, he recognized this front room of the little house behind the church. Things took shape. He heard low voices and turned his head some more.

Facing each other as they kneeled beside a chair, Joyce Cosmo and her father prayed for him.

"Hey," Blaze complained, weakly, but with a great grin and a lot of happiness. "Hey, I ain't dead!"

They rose quickly, the girl to reach down and take one of his hands between both of hers; John Cosmo to lift his eyes Heavenward and give his thanks.

"You were brave, and noble," he said humbly. "I was a fool. It takes, as you said, two sorts of gospel to win in a place like this. I hope I may go on here, to do just a fraction of the good you have."

"You were hit twice," Joyce mumbled. "We were afraid."

"I'm tough," Blaze grumbled, grinning.

"You were out of your head. You talked, about a girl like me not understanding," she said blushing, "and that I'd think you a killer for the love of it. But we do understand—"

"And so do the boys." Pal Stacker came toward them, a wide grin spread around the cigar in his mouth. "I've put out drinks on the house, and all ready sent an order for lumber to build a place the other side the tracks."

"He's going to let them get the wild, free spirits out of them during the week, so I can talk to them on Sunday."

There was a wry but human and understanding smile on John Cosmo's thin face. "I can vision Twilight of the future—"

"Sure. Sure," Stacker cut in. "With the county seat here, and Mayo Blaze in as sheriff. And I was just wondering, Parson, if you could use the Longhorn building as a church? A little larger, you know, than the one you got now. Let's go look at it."

They went out, and as Stacker glanced back, Joyce was drawing a chair close to Blaze's cot and was reaching again for his hand.

"Parson," Stacker wondered. "Parson, can a minister marry his own daughter to another man?"

John Cosmo's eyes twinkled. "Why, yes," he said. "Not only can—but will."

When the Buzzard Circles Low

By

BEN A. MILLER

SEE that buzzard floatin' wheelin',
There, beyond that sand-hill's crown?
Far below his shadder's stealin',
Stealthy-like across the groun'.
An' some man close watch is keepin',
Diggin' for the water-flow;
Prayin' that the hole starts seepin'
'Fore the buzzard circles low!

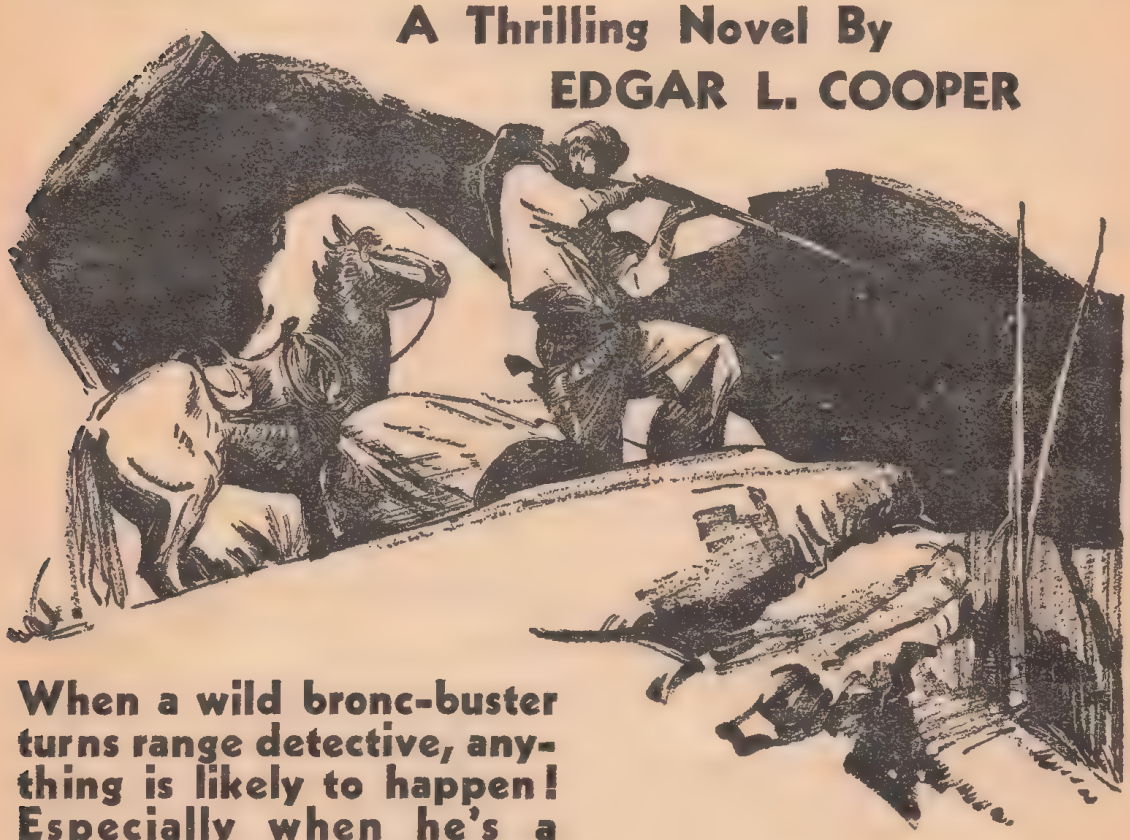
In the desert; in the mountains—
It's the same; that bird can't fail.
Yet he shuns the arsenic fountains
With the wisdom of the trail.
Once we followed up his flyin';
Found a man that still could go;
Said he only kept on tryin'
'Cause the buzzard circled low!

Once we found men full of arrers;
Heaps of shells, in battle spent;
Empty guns by clubbin' battered,
An' their stagecoach burned an' bent!
But the ground was muddy
Where they'd dropped a score of foe,
Ere the last man grinned, all bloody,
At the buzzards circling low!

Someday, soon I'll go prospectin'
For the finest lode of all;
Far into the last of deserts,
Past the farthest sand-dune's wall.
They ain't no use to try to find me;
Fer, ye see, I wouldn't know—
Wouldn't care—what's left behind me,
Where the buzzard circles low!

THE SECRET OF SKELETON CANYON

A Thrilling Novel By EDGAR L. COOPER



When a wild bronc-buster turns range detective, anything is likely to happen! Especially when he's a reckless Irishman like Rory O'Mara and he's fighting for someone like that girl from Coyotito . . .

CHAPTER I

That Girl From Coyotito

THE storm broke with surprising suddenness. The rider on the buckskin with cream colored mane and tail bent low over the stem, hit for cover in a nearby canyon, reined up beneath the lee of the cutbank before the full fury of the blast hit. All the morning had been overcast, with a tricky, sullen wind gusting over the benchland, but the bronzed young horseman had paid scant heed.

But another rider some half mile distant in the roughs was caught out for quite another reason, that of being wholly unversed regarding Western weather portents. A wise person would have turned tail and ridden hell for leather homeward as the morning grew more lowering, but Frances

Grayson had jogged on in blissful ignorance.

The increasing darkness of the forenoon and the strange antics of her star-faced pony brought her wandering thoughts back to reality with startling abruptness. Something monstrous and terrifying had swallowed up the sun, bathed the world in sinister, unnatural light. With a sharp intake of breath she cast one wide-eyed look at the roiling black cloud racing toward her out of the northwest, tried to wheel her horse into the face of it and start back.

But the range bred pinto had other ideas. As the first blast of sand and grit enveloped them, Chico reared, took the bit and bolted from the oncoming cloud straight toward the swales, the girl hanging on desperately, almost choked and half blinded.

Lunging down a path from the coulee rim, the paint pony hit bottom in a flurry of loose shale, darted for cover beneath the ledge to halt, trembling and snorting. Overhead the storm raged, howling like unleashed banshees, making a nightmare land of the Palouse country.

"Horse has more sense than you, reckon," came a dry voice out of the semi-dusk. And Frances Grayson saw she wasn't alone. A narrow-hipped, easy-shouldered young gent stood beside an unfriendly buckskin horse, busy hobbling him. And there was no mistaking who he was, even in the dimness of the canyon.

"Get busy, Rutledge," said Sutro grimly, "I'm not in the habit of backing losers!"

"Well, if it isn't my friend Mister O'Mara!"

She stared at Rory O'Mara and he looked at her dust smeared face, with the red lips and dimple in the left cheek, at her wide blue eyes beneath copper-gold hair. At her hands and feet so strikingly small, at her surprised, undaunted countenance and quizzical, innocent gaze. And staring, young Senor O'Mara of the Barcee swore softly but whole-heartedly, under his breath.

Women! It seemed like a feller couldn't go anywhere any more, without running into 'em, by hell! An' especially this petticoat staying over at young Drake's place, the Coyotito. She was always turning up at the ungodliest times, like now, for instance! Happening along just in time for him, Rory O'Mara, to rescue her from somethin' or other. After the last stunt he'd swore and be damned that he was through yanking her out of messes.

"I'm certainly grateful, Mister O'Mara," the soft voice was saying, in the purlingest kind of way. "You're so Johnny-on-the-spot, and you do it so beautifully! There's no one I'd rather be rescued by than you!"

MR. O'MARA said something to himself that made her blink. Why in hell an' high water couldn't she have stayed at home *this* day of all days?

His lips moving soundlessly, Rory ungently hobbled her nervous pinto, while Frances sat there demurely, looking down at him so collected like, and girly—yes, *girly*, there wasn't any other word for it! Then he could see nothing below a pair of gentian blue eyes, as she tied her silk neckscarf securely about her nose and chin.

"How come you rode out into this bender?" Senor O'Mara asked uncivilly. "They all crazy over at that dude spread?"

"I thought it might be only a little rain and I wasn't afraid of *that*," came her muffled reply.

Rory snorted. He couldn't see the shadowy smile hidden beneath the kerchief. Just like a plague-gonned woman, he reflected bitterly. Now he'd have to get her back home, some way or another, he supposed. Well, he might have expected it from a baby-stared slickear who'd had the gall to ask him his name as though she had a right to it, the first time they'd ever met!

At that dance in Crystal City, it was, two weeks ago. Rory had gone with a bunch of the Barcee boys, aiming merely to look in awhile. And that Coyotito gal had been there, squired by the young Drake tenderfoot who played at ranching on the Broken 3 spread. She had been wearing a dress of thin stuff, blue as powder. Supple as a panther, her violet eyes were very bright beneath black lashes, her hair shone like a puma pelt under lights. During an intermission she had stopped by the open doorway, where Rory O'Mara stood.

She'd look up at him, frankly. "Aren't you dancing, Mister—" Asked him his name, just like that! And like a dumb fool, he'd blurted it out for her to finish, innocently.

"I haven't this next one promised."

Well, he wouldn't have danced anyhow, except that Jess Sutro, owner of the Barcee Ranch and Rory's boss, was standing there with her. Rigged out like King Solomon himself in those jaguar-skin chaps and vest of his that were the talk of the country, an' thinking himself Gawd's gift to wimmen.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. I'd shore be proud to dance with you," Senor O'Mara had said. While the girl from Coyotito had snuggled up against him, white arm around his shoulders, her lithe warm body subtly fragrant with some perfume that went to Rory O'Mara's head like a big shot of forty-rod likker.

But women didn't have no place in his scheme of things, not any. He wasn't any skirt-wrangler. All they were good for was

to get men in trouble, and he wouldn't trust a one of them far as he could throw a Brahma by the tail. Rory O'Mara, twenty-two and unencumbered, aimed to stay that way.

"This is terrible," Fran Grayson was saying. "Will it never end?"

Rory shrugged, moodily. "Yore guess is good as mine. But I'll git yuh home, lady, soon as the worst is over."

He peered out presently into the muck, and his voice was more hopeful as he said, "H's gettin' lighter, a'ready. Soon we c'n shack outa here."

"YOU mean we are to ride *in this?*" the girl asked incredulously. She squinted out, and saw only the strange whirling night which came while it was not yet noon. Even protected as she was, she could feel the sand sifting through her clothes, piling grit in her hair, stinging her eyes and ears. Frances Grayson could see little sign of the storm's abating, and regarded Senor O'Mara somewhat apprehensively.

"Yeah." His answer was laconic. "Worst's over. It won't be any picnic, 'course, for you're plenty soft. But we c'n make it, reckon."

She looked a moment at his hard brown young face and hazel eyes, and the rusty cowlick that fell over his forehead. Looked at this cowpoke with his scuffed work boots, copper-riveted Levis and wool shirt, at his hat which had fanned many fires and dipped much water. Looked at his brad studded gunbelt, and the slick butted pistol that hung there.

"You don't like women very well, do you, Mister O'Mara?"

Rory caught himself on the edge of a fervently impolite reply. "My experience has mostly run to cattle, ma'am," he said shortly.

"Im sure you must have been very successful with them," said the girl from Coyotito, as Rory unhobbled her pinto.

Frances Grayson would be a very old lady before she forgot that two hour ride through the black fog. Through a nightmare world of driving sand that choked one's breath and blinded the vision, that made speech impossible. But even her tenderfoot mentality could tell that this freak storm was lessening, its crest passed as they neared the Broken 3 buildings. And Senor O'Mara drew thankful rein at the corral fence, with one disdainful squint at the tile-and-stucco sprawl of the nearby ranch house.

"Reckon you c'n find yore way in, now," he stated. Then added maliciously: "An' it won't do no harm to get rid uh some of that dirt on yore face. 'Low that once you was figgered to be a kinda purty gal—"

"Thank you sweetly, Mister O'Mara. But, you're coming in, of course?"

"Nope. Gotta be on my way. . . ." He turned his buckskin, just as young Drake came reeling toward them from the house, bareheaded, but with relief written large upon his clean-cut features.

Fran Grayson gave a queer little laugh. "You know Mister O'Mara, Stew? Mister O'Mara is the wonderful man who saved my life, *twice*, counting today! If it hadn't been for him—"

"I got to go," mumbled Senor O'Mara. And kneed Six-Bits yonderly, ducking his head against the whip of the wind. "Hey, what's the hurry!" yelled Drake. Miss Grayson's eyes were very blue and puckered.

"Must you?" she said, with a wistful little sigh. "Well, thank you again, *amigo*. Hope I can do as much for you some day." She watched the pale-maned buckskin disappear into the murk, smiled a little crookedly at her solicitous host, dismounted to let a hand take charge of the pinto. She looked up, not without feeling, at the storm-roweled sky.

"Please, dear Lord," she murmured fervently, "if I've got to be rescued again,

let it be by a one-legged man with crossed eyes and no teeth, not answering to the name of R. O'Mara!"

CHAPTER II
Tricked!

WHICH identical thoughts were just as fervently and far more profanely echoed by R. O'Mara as he shoved homeward, his mood growing blacker with the passing miles. Had it not been for an incident which happened a short while previous to his unlucky meeting-up with that Coyotito gal, he would 'shore-nuff' have asked for his time.

There were several other little things about Jess Sutro's Barcee spread that Rory had noted. And his job of breaking out a string of broncs gave him an opportunity to see and observe numerous things that evidently the other hands believed him to be ignorant of.

He'd learned, for instance, that Sutro was not without certain political influence in the Saddlehorn country, and pulled a heavy drag along Palouse Creek. Also that his hands weren't any Sunday school scholars. The only reason Rory had been hired was that he had proved his ability by sitting a orey-eyed oreaña which had just thrown Wes Morgan, Sutro's star buster. Three weeks ago that was, and Rory's breeches were beginning to itch again for the trail, and slap-bang adventure.

For the past five or six years Rory O'Mara's whole scheme of living apparently consisted of sitting a'straddle of something that was about to blow up, cave in or bust wide open into a whole hell-slue of trouble where he'd have to smoke his way out against hot odds.

And always, somehow, those adventures and promising set-ups seemed to fall flat and go tasteless, leaving him let down at the end of the fracas.

But the incident that morning in Palouse brakes gave him food for thought, and a promise of things picking up.

One of the fuzztail remuda had gotten loose during the night, and Rory took the mustang's trail come daylight. Into the Palouse roughs it led, toward Macho Gully. Topping a hogback not far from Ox Tail Coulee, Rory looked down into the rough and timbered gorge below, and a lead hornet zipped so close past his chin that he heard the nasty suck of it.

The shot hadn't died before Rory was out of his saddle with drawn Winchester, diving like an eel for cover, peering through the foliage. He saw no telltale wisp of smoke, but after a moment he heard the sound of a horse galloping away, ahead and to his left.

RORY didn't know who was shooting at him or why, but he aimed to find out. Hitting leather, he gigged Six-Bits into a run along the ridge rim. In the distance, already well out of range, he saw a rider on a sorrel horse top a knoll, turn in his saddle, hold up a rifle and wave it threateningly toward him, before disappearing over the crest.

As Rory pulled rein, a second rifle crashed shatteringly, very close from somewhere below in the gorge, and a bullet glanced off Rory's saddlehorn.

Tricked like a damned sucker! There'd been two of 'em, and one rode away to draw O'Mara's pursuit, leaving his compadre in hiding to pick Rory off at leisure.

Rory staggered and tripped as he hurtled off Six-Bits, landing behind a low fringe of scrub on the rim. His cold eyes watched the down timber with the intensity of a fighting hawk's.

Something sparkled briefly in the distance, and he knew it was the concha on the saddle of a horse concealed in the rocks and brush. Some five minutes later he glimpsed a man sneaking from the scrub, sidling toward his horse. And the muzzle

of Rory O'Mara's carbine slid after him like a snake, as his finger tautened on the trigger.

His crooked finger squeezed and the crash of his rifle rolled across the gorge like echoing thunder. From below came a yell as the skulker went down, dropping his gun. An overhanging limb deflected Rory's second bullet as the hit hombre rolled down a gully out of sight. A sudden shot from O'Mara's right, well down the ridge, told him that the first fellow he'd pursued had sneaked back to enter the scrap, although from a distance.

The diversion served its purpose, however for the wounded busher in the timber, lurching forward, managed to reach his horse and drag himself into leather. A snap shot was futile, and the man disappeared, weaving in his hull, hanging on with both hands. The other sniper also lit a shuck, riding furiously to join his comrade in flight.

But Senor O'Mara had learned his lesson. He remounted and turned back toward the east end of the ridge. It would be plumb suicide to try and follow those bush sneaks into the timber, where chances to gulch him were legion. But he'd branded one of 'em with his calling card. He'd make it his job to find out who it was.

Then the approaching storm had interfered, bringing with it that Broken-3 female to shag home. What in hell's hot water was she doing out in *that* neck of the woods? She'd surely heard all the shooting, but mentioned no word about it. Damned funny, thought Rory, for the Palouse roughs were plenty *malpais,* in more ways that one.

About a month she'd been over at Drake's rancho, and popularly rated one of the prettiest gals ever to hit the Saddlehorn. She boarded there with her dad, an absent minded old gent who puttered about looking for Indian relics, burial mounds and the like, and was a Prof way out in some California school. The girl had been hauling some of his plunder back to the Broken-3 in a light buckboard the late afternoon that Rory O'Mara happened along to pull his first rescue act, about ten days previously.

A TRIO of drunk punchers, lining out of town in a horse race, emptying sixes skyward and whooping like Comanches, had scared the dappled team hitched to the buckboard, and the cayuses promptly proceeded to make tracks yonderly through the brush. The Coyotito gal was hanging on gamely, trying her damndest to stop them, to no avail. Rory, chancing to be riding townward in the area, saw the runaway and snatched Frances Grayson off the swaying seat onto his horse just before the dapples keeled over the vehicle in taking a fast bend of the trail. She wasn't hurt, but badly shaken up and jarred.

He'd had to see her home that time, too. And walked most of the way, for Six-Bits wouldn't carry double.

It was in such a frame of mind the unincumbered Mister O'Mara, aiming more than ever to stay that way, corralled his buckskin at the Barcee ranch. He said nothing to any of the hands about the shooting that morning, and it became pretty patent that none of them savvyed anything of the affair, or had attempted to keep him from riding on toward Macho Gully with Winchesters.

But that night, after he'd turned into his bunk, something happened which gave him ideas along different lines.

The hour was late, and the ranch was quiet save for the wind that still clawed at the bunkhouse in dying gusts. Two riders had come in shortly after supper to see Sutro, but they didn't dally long, or make their identity known to the bunkhouse gang.

Rory dozed fitfully, tired in spite of his whang-leather constitution. A medley of off-key snores rasped in the darkness. A

slight noise outside the door jerked him to instant wakefulness. He turned on his side, drew the six that was beneath his pillow, and glued his gaze upon the door.

After a short silence came a tiny creak, the door eased open to admit a shadowy figure which quickly oozed into the darkness. Rory couldn't see the intruder, but shortly came a scratching sound, a grunt, and a sleepy voice rasped, "What in hell yuh doin'—hookin' sheep?"

A silence followed, but presently there was a light step, then a pause. Rory gathered himself, slid to the floor cautiously, and as the shuffling football halted near his bunk, suddenly flung his blanket in an arc toward the motionless prowler as he leaped aside and down.

A gun smashed, its momentary stab of flame etching a dark clad figure at the bunk-end, pawing aside the blanket as he wheeled, his wild shot slamming into a wall. And a split-second later the room became a madhouse, as half clad punchers were on their feet smashing into one another, howling curses and questions.

In the mêlée a full clad figure smashed his way to the door, striking out with fist and gun barrel. Rory, whose aim was to block the exit, banged hard into someone, reeled from the impact, then stumbled over another waddy who was just rising.

The door opened, banged shut; the intruder raced across the ranch yard to fling himself upon a horse and line away in a tattoo of hoofs. The gang inside the shack were still moiling about, fighting, swearing and yelping, when Foreman Jake Tompkins appeared from his room, lantern in one hand and hogleg in the other, bellowing oaths and queries.

"Somebody prowlin'," said Rory, as order was somewhat restored. "Seen him sneak in, and I flung a blanket on him in the dark. He done the shootin', then skulked out in the fracas. Dunno what he wanted—"

Tompkins, tall, heavy-built, with hair and mustache a tawny yellow, looked hard at Rory out of eyes the same color. Then his gaze became blank as he grunted, turned away.

"Well, he's gone now, whoever he was an' whatever he wanted. Heard him line away hell for leather. You guys shut yore yaps and pile down. Excitement's over for the night, reckon."

He stalked away, dismissing the incident just like that. But as the men grumblingly quieted once more, Rory O'Mara wasn't unaware of the sidelong, speculative glances flicked his way from the Barcee riders, and one or two had a good, long, appraising look at the bronc buster as he crawled back into his bunk.

"Damned queer," muttered one Wes Morgan. "Plenty dam queer!"

Rory chuckled noiselessly to himself in the darkness, turned over and went back to sleep. Something dam' queer! Seemed to be hooked up with his ride over toward Macho Gully that morning. Well, his motto was tuh sleep light an' trust nobody. . . .

The good old Texas proverb.

CHAPTER III

Death in the Chaparral

NEXT morning Rory's intention to rib up some excuse to ride away and pursue his line of figgering further was conveniently anticipated by Jess Sutro. Calling him to the house, Sutro told Rory that a bunch of stuff had drifted toward the brakes in the storm, and ordered him into the west country for a looksee. The weather had cleared a lot, making visibility fairly good despite the hanging dust layers. Getting a line on the stock shouldn't be hard, the Barcee owner finished.

Rory O'Mara gravely agreed, his face every bit as poker blank as Sutro's. A big man, the Barcee boss, tall and wide shouldered, black haired and black eyed,

with straight, unsmiling lips and neatly trimmed black mustache. Darkly handsome he was, with teeth very white against his swarthy complexion; a man of wealth, polish and education.

A queer character, with his past life a mystery. He'd lived in the Palouse some five years, and many stories were whispered about him. One truth stood out, however, Jess Sutro was a dangerous man to cross.

He'd been rushing that Coyotito gal ever since she'd been at the Broken-3, and range talk had it that they were engaged. Still other rumors whispered that young Stewart Drake, her host, was giving her a big play, offering her the chatelaineship of his Spanish hacienda.

Old family friends they were, and all that. Bets were being slyly wagered as to the winner, whether the Grayson girl would take the attractive young Drake with his pile of dinero, or dark handsomeness Sutro.

Rory had scowled at this bunkhouse and saloon gab, although the affair mattered not a fiddler's damn to him. His job right now was finding out who that bunkhouse prowler had been, likewise who those two sons were that tried a gulch on him over Macho way.

As he rode away that morning Rory was speculating about the spider and the fly. With Jess Sutro in the spider's role, which hadn't fooled the Brazos rider any whatever. Not for nothing had Rory rodded, at sixteen, a sizeable spread of mighty salty boys down on the Border, inherited from his hellion daddy. Nor for nothing had he afterward been a deputy sheriff, Wells Fargo guard, and gunslinger in a stock war or two during his various driftings.

So he hummed gently to himself as he considered things, keeping an ear cocked along his backtrail, and a keen eye across the front. What made Rory O'Mara so dangerous an opponent was that uncanny ability to sense the thoughts of others, to feel and interpret the cross currents playing around him. Thus he knew that Jess Sutro harbored some secret design in sending him into the brakes that day, and all of Rory's senses were feeling out like tentacles to grasp it. He didn't ride straight for Macho Gulley. Instead his route was wide and circuitous, and he kept off skyline ridges to travel the swales and coulees.

IT WAS thus, as the day progressed, that young Mister O'Mara became acquainted with one or two peculiar, and very pertinent facts. Like the band of blooded horses cached at the end of Ox Tail pocket, just where it funneled into Macho. Like the scattering of cattle drifting along the gully brakes, whitefaces as well as rangy red steers. Like the trio busy branding a mess of slickears in a box coulee, that Rory peered down upon from his covert on the gully rim. . . .

So much his stealthy Injun tactics uncovered, sneaking upon the guarded canyon from its blind side, evading the lookout he knew to be posted, watching for his arrival. A very sizeable rustling layout, of mixed whites and Spigs, using as their channel that narrow, twisting barranca tagged Macho which snaked from the edge of the Palouse roughs clear down into the Balcon country.

No wonder he'd been shot at; turned back. Must want to get rid of him bad. Rory O'Mara would probably have tried to get nearer the heart of things, had not the appearance of a not so distant rider diverted his attention, and sharpened his caution.

A slim and boyish figure astride a paint pony, with nothing of timidity about her as she rode the roughs, now and then halting under cover to scan the terrain with spy glasses. Maybe she was out hunting for her dad, maybe not. . . .

"Hell," said the disgusted Senor O'Mara. "No use wastin' more time here, with her

prowlin' around. "Next thing I know, I'll hafta be rescuing her agin, by hell!"

He slipped back to his horse and eased away. And the thwarted humor of his thoughts as he rode the brakes toward the lower benches, caution somewhat relaxed, came very near for the second time in as many days writing a period after his name. For a button suddenly snipped from his jacket front, as the cloth tore and a branding iron scorched his skin with zippy hiss. The bang of the rifle blended with the rip, and Rory O'Mara flung himself sideways off his plunging bucksin, leaving split reins dragging.

Flung off to hit earth, jerking free his Winchester from saddle boot. And a second leaden slug struck the stock of his carbine a loud slapping blow as he stumbled, staggered and went down, rolling to the sparse shelter of a plum copse well studded with cactus. Four more shots followed in swift tattoo, and the bush into which Rory had plunged was lead-whipped as he hugged the ground.

Then, uphill in the scrub, a pebble clattered in its descent, and a chaparral clump moved more than it should have, as the gulcher's shoulder tip showed when he manipulated his weapon. Rory's carbine cracked flatly, viciously, the bush-artist leaped to his feet, dropping his rifle and clawing at the shoulder. . . .

TWICE more the Winchester spanged, and the fellow dropped with slugs through chest and face. For a long minute Rory crouched where he was, eyes raking the hillside for sign of another enemy. Yet but one gun had done the shooting, and finally Sénor O'Mara, satisfied that no other marksman lurked over there, slid out of covert, crossed the threadlike trail, and moved cautiously upslope, carbine held ready. From behind the chaparral clumb he saw a spurred, high-heeled boot protruding. Circling the spot until he could look down on what lay in the thicket, Rory took one squint and then dropped directly downward.

The fellow was dead, sprawled there crumpled and twisted, a hawk-visaged hombre with a crooked nose, his slaty eyes glazed. Crossed gunbelts circled his belly, with both sixes thonged down, unfired. The rifle lay nearby, barrel still warm.

Rory shook his head. He'd never seen this jigger before, and a search of his clothing turned up nothing by which he could be identified. Scowling, whistling soundlessly between his teeth, O'Mara picked up the rifle. It would be strange indeed if he didn't find on that gun the private sign of its owner. Most toters, as he well knew, had the habit of cutting some small mark somewhere on all their personal effects.

Presently he found it. A little nick on the hammer shank, invisible unless the weapon was cocked. The same sign was on both the cutters, too, a damned neat place to brand property.

Casting about Rory soon located the dead man's bronc, hitched in a clump of laurel on the bench above. The saddle pockets were empty, and no brand showed on the wiry claybank that would give O'Mara any clue as to its owner. Rory squinted toward the westering sun, rolled a cigarette, untied the pony's bridle.

"Well, the's one thing, fuzzy," he muttered. "It's gittin toward yore feedin' time, same as mine. An mebbe, *mebbe* that'll mean somethin'."

Leading the claybank down to the trail, he looped its reins over the saddle prong, set it going with a hat-slap across the rump. With a snort the animal lunged away, heading up the trail in the direction that Rory had been traveling. Forking his own horse, he followed, satisfied that the dead man's mount was headed for the feedbox.

It didn't stop to graze along the way, but settled to a distance eating trot, moving steadily. And, strangely, away from

the darkening vicinity of Macho Gully and the rustlers hangout. Rory O'Mara's eyes narrowed at that thought, and he nodded shortly to himself as he kept just near enough to the claybank's rear to hold him in sight, but not crowd him.

"If that bronc don't lead me some'rs, I'm a damn poor guesser!" he told himself sagely.

At length, as the sun dipped behind the Palouse hills, the claybank stopped at a gap in a wire fence. Rory got down, face drawn into a scowl, eyes whipping along the line of barb-wire. Unless he was badly mistaken, that was the southwest outfence of Broken-3 ranch . . .

"Drake's, huh?" he muttered. "What the humped-up hell?"

Still swearing softly, Rory caught the claybank, led him off the path into the brush and tied him, then shagged on for what lay ahead, the coming dusk hiding the hard light glinting in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

Trouble at the Broken-3

QUITE openly Rory rode up to the Broken-3 buildings, where the big tile-and-stucco hacienda sprawled in its oak mot, the first lights glowing through the windows. He walked his buckskin toward the bunkhouse, where some dozen punchers were hanging around, waiting the call for chuck in the adjacent messhall and kitchen. None of them gave the newcomer more than passing attention as the clang of an iron triangle called them to grub-pile.

Leaving his horse at the corral bars, Rory went to the wash bench and cleaned up, waiting for all the Broken-3 hands to get themselves settled before he walked to the mess-shack. Full dusk sifted down when he entered the room.

Eleven men were seated at the table, at the head of which was the burly, thick-shouldered foreman, Sam Rutledge. A beefy-faced fellow with a thick mustache and shaggy eyebrows that met in a black bar across his nose. On his right was an empty chair, although there was a setup in front of it. The rest of the places were filled.

"Howdy," nodded Rory. "Got room for a hungry Tehanner, folks?"

Everybody looked at him. Some mumbled greeting through their chow, others merely glanced indifferently and kept on eating. Rutledge stared hard at the newcomer a moment, wolf eyes blank and close-set above his wolfish nose. With eyes as bleak and lifeless as his ash-colored chair, searching the hard, sun-dyed face of Rory O'Mara.

"Set an eat, hombre," grunted Rutledge. "Cook 'ull bring you some tools. What did yuh do, git strayed from Barcee?"

"Hazin' strays," replied Rory, carelessly. "Some stuff that drifted west in the blow, yistidy. Didn't finish to git back in time for grub line."

Rutledge grunted, flicked a look at him, went on shoveling food. Rory busied himself at eating, not unaware of the covert glances shot his way by the Broken-3 hands. More than once he noted the foreman thoughtfully eyeing the empty chair at his right. Caught others looking that way, speculatively, at odd moments.

Rory saw too, in the brief flash that it appeared, that vague figure which flitted past the open window, stealing a swift look into the busy room before fading noiselessly in the dark. But his speculation was interrupted by the snort of a horse, the thud of a solid blow followed by lurid oaths and a groan. Noises wafting up from the corrals . . .

"What the hell?" Rutledge half rose, scowling at the open door.

Rory laughed shortly. "From the sound o' things," he drawled, helping himself to pintos, "somebody musta been monkeyin'

around my bronc. That biscuit-eater don't allow nobody but me to do that."

THE foreman sank back, with a hard, short look at O'Mara, which that young man pretended not to see. A wiry red-head near the door got up and slipped out, to presently return with word that the wrangler had been kicked by that several-kinds-of-so-and-such buck at the corral fence, and while tendin' to his own business, by gawd!

"Sorta funny, that," commented Rory dryly. "Never knowed Six-Bits to be so uncommonly ornery before. Hope yore feller wasn't hurt much."

"Dang nigh busted his laig!" snarled the red-head, glaring at the Barcee hand. "Hell with sich a critter, says I! Oughta be shot!"

Rory glanced at him with a hard little grin. "A feller ain't got any business to 'tend to, right at the heels of a strange bronc, if yuh ask me, hombre," he said with slow meaning.

To that, no one replied. Rory savveyed what had happened. The wrangler had tried to go through his saddle pockets, and got hell kicked out of him. And foreman Sam Rutledge knew it, too, for pushing back his plate and twisting a smoke, he asked a little too carelessly,

"Run across anybody wranglin' the west pasture, today?"

"Yeah," nodded Rory, draining his coffee cup. "Coupla fellers."

"What did they look like? Know 'em?"

"Uh-huh." O'Mara reached for the makins. "One was a buck Injun called Sittin' Bull. The other'n had long yeller hair, General Custer, I think his name was. They talked mostly in sign language . . ."

Rory grinned at Rutledge, whose beefy face grew very red. "Smart jigger, aintcha? Learn that over to the Barcee, huh? Reckon it's what fetched you to these parts."

"Could happen," nodded Rory gravely.

"Hey!" bawled the fat cook, poking his head through the kitchen door, "Scorp's brawnk jest come—"

"Hobble yore dam' trap!" ordered the foreman roughly, getting to his feet. "We ain't deef in here!"

He stalked out, and presently Rory heard him swearing a blue streak, anger well mixed with puzzlement, and an undertone of apprehension. Rory knew again what had happened. The claybank which he'd staked near the wire fence had come in, O'Mara made certain that he'd do that, sooner or later, by cutting the bridle reins almost through.

Sam Rutledge had cause to be both puzzled and apprehensive. Cut reins, empty saddle, and the horse inside the closed fence. What the hell? Rory O'Mara grinned at the ceiling mysteriously, smoke dribbling from his nose. Let old Sam cuss and wonder, dam' him.

"HEY, Tusk!" Rutledge's voice called from outside, and a lanky, buck-toothed waddy near the head of the table got up and shuffled through the door, a mutter of words trailing after him. Rory watched him go indolently, his eyes meeting the gaze of the surly red-head.

"What's the matter," he drawled lazily. "One of the hands sick, or somethin'?"

The flame-topped puncher ranged a glance at the empy chair, looked back to Rory. The rest of the men had quit the shack, leaving only the pair of them at the table. "Nope, nobody sick. Scorp's away to town . . ." his voice trailed off, face hardening.

"Scorp, huh?" O'Mara furrowed his brows, as if in deep thought. "Lemme see, tall kind of guy, sandy complected, with a crooked nose?"

"Yeah," nodded Red-head, eyeing Rory. "Know him, do yuh?"

"Naw," replied O'Mara. "Just guessed it was him, that's all."

"Why, you—" The red-headed waddy's neck pulled in as his shoulders tightened. The sudden silence was stark and fraught with something that hadn't been in the room a second before. In the quiet they could hear the mumble of voices down by the corrals, where the men talked in low tones. Wondering about that claybank, with its cut reins . . .

"Watch the birdie, Red," droned Rory. "I'm tellin' fortunes."

"Huh? Fortunes!" For a second Red looked blank. "What the hell!"

"Fortunes," nodded O'Mara. "In coffee grinds, at the bottom of this here cup. See 'em?" He half turned his cup, with his left hand.

"Course I see 'em. What in hell about it?"

"This. I see somethin' there about you, in 'em." Rory's voice suddenly became very cold and bleak and dangerous, as he stared straight at the puzzled, suspicious Broken-3 rider.

"Plumb about you, Red. Them grounds says, if yuh don't drop that gun on the floor, dam' pronto, yo're sure as Gawd made green apples goin' to die, feller."

While he spoke Rory's .45 had somehow come into his hand, and with a flick covered Red, its barrel resting negligently along the edge of the table. The red-head swallowed something, let the six he'd sneaked out under cover of the board fall to the floor. He was white around the gills.

"On yore hind legs, white-haired boy," Rory ordered shortly, rising and sliding his gun back in leather. "We're headin' outside, you'n me, an' without yore cutter. Likewise *me* is walkin' behind you, *sabe?* Now rattle those hocks, an' keep quiet."

They left the room, heading across the ranch yard toward the corrals. The hammer of hoofs came clear in the night. Some of the hands were riding. Out to look for the missing Scorp Plunkett . . .

A light shone in the bunkhouse, and Red angled that way without looking back at the Barcee puncher for directions.

"Keep right on, circlin' around to the back, feller," Rory said. "Start any ruckus an' I'll cut yore crupper in two."

Red followed directions docilely enough. He knew when he was under the mistletoe. Rory, walking warily, cut across toward his buckskin, his eyes probing the shadows. The ranch yard showed empty. Six-Bits stood quietly enough by the corral bars, albeit he pawed a bit nervously, impatient for his feed-bag.

Rory angled past the corner of the blacksmith shop and very suddenly felt himself wrapped in a grip like a python's. His burly attacker, skulking in the shadows, had moved with surprising quickness and stealth for his heft, and had Rory's gun arm pinned against his side before the Barcee puncher could empty leather.

Slamming the lighter Rory hard against the wall, Sam Rutledge grated, "You're doin' too damned much snoopin', feller! Nor are yuh foolin nobody here. What happened tuh Scorp Plunkett, blast you!"

Rory was helpless in the grasp of the bigger man, whose reputation as a rough-and-tumble fighter was feared all over the Saddlehorn.

THE foreman's splayed fingers were digging at his throat, cutting his wind, though O'Mara twisted and fought like a trapped wolf he could neither free his arm, or break Rutledge's savage hold which was caving in his ribs. Shaking him like a terrier worries a rat, eyes blazing, Rutledge snarled,

"We know how to take keer of snoops, *muchachito*. Plenty how—"

Quite suddenly, just as swiftly as Rory had been set upon, Sam Rutledge gasped queerly, slumped into O'Mara, dropped his arms weakly. And Rory, wheezing for breath, shucked his gun clear and slapped the Broken-3 foreman with a smart whack across the side of the head, dropping him like an axed beef. Reeling back against the smithy wall, panting for air, young Mister O'Mara stared with blinking eyes. Lightnin' had hit from somewhere, but—The gal from Coyotito stood there with a length of wagon iron in her hand!

"I—I hit him over the head," she said a bit breathlessly, her blue eyes rather large. "Is he killed, do you suppose?"

"My Gawd, lady!" gulped Rory. "You here?"

"Yes," said Frances Grayson. "I'm here. Is—is he killed?"

"Not likely. Couldn't bust that son's head with a crowbar. How come yuh happened along, thisaway, just like a present from Santy?"

"You'd be surprised." Frances Grayson let out a long breath. "I—you see, Mister O'Mara, I've been watching you for quite some time. Saw you riding across the benches. Then followed you to the ranch after, er, your little trouble near the Gully . . ."

She flashed him a very brief, crooked smile. "You men have a great advantage over us, it seems," she finished plaintively. "You get to *do* things. While we just have to sit around and watch. I think it would be just bully to belong to *your* side! Where something *really exciting* is always happening—"

"Hell's hot water!" Senor O'Mara stared at her, jaw a bit slack. "Looky here, lady, you don't know what yuh'r messin' in! I'm shore obliged for yore timely help, but now you git away from here, pronto.

"Lissen—yuh see *anything else* out on the Macho this evenin'?"

"Why—yes." Miss Grayson seemed to ponder a second. "Yes, I believe I did, now that you mention it—"

"My God!" groaned Rory. Grasping her by the arm, he began hurrying the Coyotito girl toward the ranch house. "Yuh'r' monkeyin with a mess of sidewinders, lady. Git in that house an stay there! Sam Rutledge ain't a son to let anybody belt him coo-coo, then forget it. Hurry now, for I gotta ride."

Señor O'Mara halted, glanced hurriedly about. The girl stood there, watching him, a little shadowy smile hovering about her lips.

"Then it's — good night, Mister O'Mara?"

"Yeah, it is." A queer embarrassment made Rory's voice gruff. "I—aw, *gracias* again for yore help, lady! I got a kind of idea that mebbe we'd sorta get along, better acquainted. Hell, I dunno why I'm blatherin' off like this—"

The girl from Coyotito smiled very softly. "Don't you, Mister O'Mara?" she said gently.

Something hot, and very tingling, suffused Señor O'Mara's face, as he hastily took his departure. Hit leather to ride hard away in the darkness, giving the Broken-3 bunkhouse and smithy a wide, wide berth. His ears still burned, and his face felt like he'd been scrapping a grass fire, while a peculiar anger roweled his whole insides.

"Damn the woman!" he snarled. "Why can't she tend to her own knittin', by hell . . ."

CHAPTER V
Bold Caballero

DANDY Jess Sutro paced back and forth across the length of the spacious living room in his Bar-C Ranch, his dark features plunged in uneasy thought. Now and then he paused to pour a drink from the bottle on the steerhorn table, and his gaze kept flicking to the clock above the colored stone fireplace. Its hands hands pointed to twenty minutes past midnight.

The ranch buildings seemed to be places of sleep, save for the light in that one room, a room with huge beamed ceiling, stag antlers on its walls, Indian rugs on the floor. The blaze on the hearth reflected redly upon Sutro's pearl handled six-shooter, the dusky woodwork. Outside a tawny Texas moon rode late above the eastern rim, lighting the Palous country in shadowy, dust-misted quicksilver. Far in the night came the wail of a coyote on some distant ridge, the loneliness of the ages in that solitary chant. Sutro, hearing it, queerly shivered a little, reaching for the almost emptied bottle again.

Despite contrary appearances, a streak of deep-rooted superstition dwelt in the Barcee owner's makeup. That lonesome howl chilled him, somehow, brought home the fact that life, after all, was just a day between sleeps. A minute to smile and an hour to cry, then the stars shining just the same for some other hombre, and some other coyote wailing on the same old ridge . . .

Things had taken a bad break, these last couple of days. Sutro wasn't so sure that Frances Grayson's old man was the harmless potterer he appeared to be, with his digging and exploring for Indian relics. And reports had come to him that the girl herself had been seen more than once riding about the roughs, using field glasses. Despite his desire for her, Jess Sutro had not been able to shake a certain warning regarding the Grayson girl that his acute sense whispered. But on the other hand, for her to be other than she appeared seemed preposterous.

A cautious tattoo at the door jerked the man from his dark thoughts as he unbarred and opened it to admit a couple of men. One was the yellow haired-and-eyed Jake Tompkins, Barcee foreman. The second was Sam Rutledge of Stewart Drake's Broken-3, on the Coyotito. And Rutledge had a strip of court-plaster over a swelling on his head, above the ear.

"Couldn't get here no sooner, Sutro," he growled. "I come—"

"Why not?" Sutro's cut-in was cold and curt, his black gaze rested upon the wound on Rutledge's head, then flitted to the foreman's eyes.

"PLENTY why," said Rutledge, helping himself to a drink. "That damned bronc stomper of yourn is the main reason. He's got hisself wise to more'n one thing going on hereabouts! Thought you was gonna take care of him, after our *habla* last night . . ."

"Well, *your* man Tusk Martin didn't!" rapped Sutro. "Bungled things plenty in that bunkhouse affair. He was plumb lucky to get away, after sneaking back here to tend to O'Mara. And O'Mara evaded the man that I sent out before daylight today. The one that rode in late from the brakes . . ."

"I know—Snake Smith." Rutledge flopped into a chair. "An' that ain't all Mister O'Mara done today, neither! He kilt Scorp Plunkett deader'n hell, then follered Scorp's bronc to the ranch, plumb from the roughs. He's wised up aplenty, an' is primed for trouble. Lookin' for Scorp is what made me so late—the Macho boys jest found him."

"Score—Señor O'Mara, two up!" commented Sutro sardonically. "First he guns hell out of Kibber, when Kibber and Mc-

Cann try to bush him yesterday. Then queers Tusk Martin's scheme and now rubs out Scorp Plunkett. And from the looks of your head, Sam, he's hung the Indian sign on *you,* too!"

Rutledge's eyes were red slits. "That dam' gal over yonder jimmied the game, Sutro!" he burst out. "I had O'Mara by the short-hairs tonight, an' she horned in. Snuk up and hit me over the head, by Gawd! Right after Scorp's cayuse comes in. She an' O'Mara have hell-shore to be took care of, pronto! *She* mighta' already told Drake, now—"

Jess Sutro's eyes were ugly as he nodded. The whole keystone of his scheme to snatch complete control of Palouse Valley depended upon stealing Stewart Drake blind, utterly discredit his spread, turn suspicion of twirling a long rope against the Broken-3.

Already his crowd had made heavy inroads upon the Coyotito stock, driving them out of the Saddlehorn by way of Macho Gully. Rutledge, working hand in glove with him, assisted by two picked hands, Red Cott and Tusk Martin, were rustling their own stuff right and left. There had been three men on the Broken-3 secret list, but now Scorp Plunkett was dead.

Sutro got up suddenly. "You'd better pull the rag out and get busy, Rutledge," he said grimly. "You're costing me money, and I'm not in the habit of backing losers!"

"What dinero yuhr puttin' out on this deal you'll make back a hundred percent!" Rutledge snarled. "All of us savvy that. You ain't losin' a chili dime, Sutro. Right, Jake?"

BEFORE the Barcee foreman answered Sutro spoke. "Listen, Sam. And this goes for you too, Tompkins. The time for monkey business is over. We play with both fists, and for keeps, from right now on. Don't either one of you men forget that I can make things damned unpleasant for you both any time I choose—

"You, Jake, I've kept out of the pen, to rod this spread. And you, Rutledge, I saved from hanging in New Mexico, to get you on as riding boss over at young Drake's. But I can still have you hung. Keep that in mind, *amigo.*"

"I won't swing by myself, Sutro," said Sam Rutledge, his eyes burning.

"Better not bank too heavy on that," hummed Sutro, dangerously. "You'll do wise to take my orders from now on without pawing dirt like a mad bull. You're just a hired hand, remember." Sutro laughed uglily and turned to the scowling Tompkins. "That clear to you likewise, Jake? Substituting the chain-gang for the gallows?"

"Yuhr the boss," said Tompkins thickly.

"Okay, boss." Rutledge's voice was strangled. "The lid goes off, startin' tonight. By the time I'm done that Drake tenderfoot won't own airy hoof or acre in Palouse, by God! It'll be yores from the brakes to the crick! I'll take keer of that meddlin' female, too, an' plug yore snoppy bronc stomper so full o' holes you can see Sunday through him!"

Cursing, the Broken-3 rod lurched to his feet, stomped out into the night, followed by the ugly-faced Tompkins. Jess Sutro stood before the fire, wrapped in deep and studied thought. "More power to you, Sam!" he said softly. "You had better be right, *plumb right!*"

A hidden eye, glued to the corner of the roof eave above the open window, winked slyly as the murmured words came to keen ears. "Bad business to start prophecyin', hombres," its owner said inaudibly, "onless yuh in plumb right with the Almighty!"

And very noiselessly, moving with the stealth of a cougar, young Señor O'Mara dropped to earth from the tile overhang of the hacienda roof, drew after him a length of lariat, and faded into the misty

shadows like some flitting ghost headed homeward before the crack of dawn. Untying his hidden buckskin, he mounted and catwalked the animal away from the vicinity, humming beneath his breath.

"A plumb profitable li'l snoop," he chuckled. "Yes siree. Which same cleared up a whole hell-slue o' puzzlin' things, yeah. Thank yuh sweetly, Señors Sutro an' Rutledge! What's yore lousy hides worth *now?*"

CHAPTER VI
According to Plans

SOME two hours past noon the next day Señor O'Mara lay hidden upon the rim of Macho Gully, looking down very interestedly upon certain goings-on in the barranca below. His Winchester snugged at his elbow, ready; his squinted eyes were bright, watchful. After a plumb chilly camp of the night before, the sun felt warm and comfortable to his back as he hunkered still as a lizard in the laurel copse.

He well knew, of course, that the word was out for him—jerk and kill, on sight. He didn't think that all the Coyotito punchers were mixed in this dirty game, but he knew that Tusk Martin and Red Cott were Rutledge's henchmen, as the dead Scorp had been. And the latter's body, he found out that morning, had been moved, likely by some of the holed-up Macho gang who'd combed the brakes for it.

Rory knew his safety hung by a hair, and moved on the alert for anything. He amused himself with pleasant anticipation and speculation in which there was not a thought of the gal from Coyotito. All that day he hadn't glimpsed any painted pony with its familiar boyish figure, skulking about the roughs, and Señor O'Mara was fervently thankful for the fact.

This thing wasn't goin' to be any Christmas party, from the way it shaped up. An' damned shore not any place for a petticoat who didn't have any more gumption than to blunder around spyin' on long loopers, an' rappin' a salty hairpin like Sam Rutledge over the head with a piece of wagon tire. If her daddy an' young Drake had any sense they'd keep her hawg-tight at that dude spread this man's day!

For true to his vow, Foreman Rutledge of the Broken-3 hadn't let any grass grow under his feet in starting the ball rolling. The evidence of that lay below Rory O'Mara's eyes in the twisting gulch beneath.

A mass of bawling, bellowing cattle were sweeping along the canyon, in a tight-packed drove. They numbered about a hundred and fifty head, and were of mixed brand as well as Rory could tell through the dust. The majority of them Broken-3's, he noted, and high-blooded stuff. A daring, bald-rumped steal on the part of the enraged Rutledge, in those dark hours of early morning, and at the rate his quartet of rustlers was hazing 'em, the herd would be in Canada before tomorrow dawn-crack!

VERY swiftly, very noiselessly, Rory O'Mara left his hiding place and started down the arroyo rim by a path he'd traversed shortly before. Down where the passage narrowed to a gutlike neck between the rocky walls, and a short drift fence spraddled it, blocking off the slot-like mouth of Oxtail Canyon. A three-wire fence banked high with drifted tumbleweed, thistles and tinder dry broom, not to mention piles of driftwood brought down by freshets.

Striking matches rapidly, Rory ignited certain hollow places in the barrier which he'd scooped out shortly before, after spying from a distance the fast-hazed herd heading toward Macho. With a last satisfied look at his handiwork, Rory shinned back up the rim, watching the mouth of

that bottle-neck two hundred yards below.

The first intimation the quartet of drivers had of trouble ahead was a dense billow of smoke that rolled above the canyon, and the growing roar of a flame-shot wall that rushed along the gully toward the loping herd.

With startled yells the rustlers jerked up, but the lead steers already had that notion. Bawling in terror, they wheeled, started the cattle behind to wild milling, then reversed direction in a thundering stampede, moving out of the canyon like a juggernaut. The trio of hombres bringing up drag didn't have a Chinaman's chance before that avalanche, because the canyon walls were unscalable and the distance too great to its far end.

His face set hard, mouth grim, Rory O'Mara deliberately raised his Winchester, triggered down upon the fleeing rustler who'd been out front setting pace. The matter of ethics didn't deter the Border hairpin one iota, he was the breed of *Tejano* who would shoot down without hesitation and without mercy any snake who had tried to gulch him. He didn't monkey with sidewinders—he killed 'em.

When the rustler tumbled no expression of regret showed on Señor O'Mara's face. Only thankfulness that the victim's mount, freed of its load, seemed well on the way to escape the flaming avalanche. As for the trio ahead of the stampede, Rory had good notions about what would befall all of them.

Hastening to his staked out buckskin, Rory forked leather and headed toward the box-coulee where yesterday he'd spotted the band of Broken-3 horses. It was a goodish sort of ride, for he aimed to reach it by a roundabout way. And he knew that the fire would make more than one denizen of the Palouse country sit up and wonder.

"Hope it makes the buzzards gather," he chuckled grimly. "For I think this here swaree is about ready for a showdown!"

FRANCES GRAYSON shoved her painted pony toward the roughs at a brisk pace, making her companions step lively to keep up. Young Stewart Drake rode beside one stirrup, Foreman Sam Rutledge loped close to the other. Bringing up the rear a few rods back were Red Cott and a puncher called Stormy. The quintet were headed toward Macho Gully, and from the expressions on their faces, rather figgered on finding something pretty rotten, there.

Shortly before noon the foreman had come pounding up to the ranch on a lathered horse, with news that a whole bunch of prize whitefaces had been looped during the night. And when Drake had insisted upon accompanying him in his search for same, Rutledge hadn't objected. Nor did he further object when the Grayson girl expressed her intention of riding with them. For such had been Sam Rutledge's plan, cut and dried.

So they had left the girl's father back at Coyotito, fiddling with his relics, while they burned the breeze for Macho. They were still some two miles distant when the first puff of smoke rolled above its rim, and the roar of flames mingled with the roar of stampede.

For a moment Sam Rutledge looked blank, startled, then his face twisted in animal rage as he slammed gigs to his horse. Something had gone awry, here, something that was going to change his carefully schemed plans in short order.

But it was the faint yet unmistakable spang of a rifle shot that changed his direction very abruptly, made him head his cayuse toward the upper end of Oxtail and a certain spot he well knew there. Young Drake's shouted queries went unanswered in the fast riding, and Fran Grayson, her face rather set, asked none herself. For her woman's hunch whispered that they

were upon the brink of very startling events.

Reining up at last near the wooded bench above Oxtail, Rutledge gave a peculiar sort of whistle. Directly a horseman on a calico pony came loping out of the timber, a tough looking jigger with the blackest pair of eyes Fran Grayson had ever seen. A meaning look passed between him and the foreman, and Rutledge demanded to know what had happened.

Plenty, the fellow related. Someone had fired the gully below, stampeded the herd. Shot one hombre off his horse, caused the others to be tromped to doll rags under the hoofs. The drove was plumb scattered, he reckoned, heading back toward where they'd come from.

Rutledge, his visage apoplectic, couldn't speak for a moment. "So! Yuh missed him, did yuh, Streeter!" he finally managed.

"Yeh," said Streeter bleakly. "What's to do, Sam?" His black eyes shot to the girl, young Drake, back to the foreman. Fran flung a swift glance at him, felt a chill creep into her blood as all of a sudden grim conviction came. She knew!

The moment stood still—then Stewart Drake heard his name cried sharply. "Look out!" warned Frances Grayson. "They're fixing to kill you!"

The smash of a six behind her came as answer. With a groan the loyal rider called Stormy tumbled from his saddle, drilled heart high by the treacherous Red Cott. And even as the awkward young rancher clawed at the gun on his hip, Sam Rutledge deliberately shot him through the shoulder, breaking his collar bone.

With a gasp the girl grabbed for her holstered .38, only to have it slapped out of her hand by the grinning Streeter. And almost in the same movement he snaked the carbine from her saddle boot, making her pinto shy hard, snorting. Even as she was getting her pony in hand Sam Rutledge had her, gripped firmly in his hamlike hands.

"Just take it easy, wildcat!" he snarled. "You ain't goin' nowhere—'cept on a li'l pasear with us!"

Fran's eyes gleamed queerly, though her face was pale. "So the dirt shows up at last!" she said breathlessly. "I wondered just how long you figured you could fool folks . . ."

Rutledge's lips curled back like a coyote's as his wrist grip tightened cruelly. "Smart gal!" he droned softly. "Damned smart gal!"

"Regardless," said Fran Grayson just as quietly, "I wouldn't be in your boots, Sam Rutledge, for every damn cow between here and the River Jordan!"

"Yuh likely won't be fittin *nobody's* boots," replied Sam Rutledge, "very dam' long, lady!"

CHAPTER VII
Revelations

"DANDY JESS" SUTRO rode toward the line shack in Skeleton Canyon, in a fit mood for murder. With him jingled Jake Tompkins, silent before the rage which consumed his boss. Sundown was upon them, and deep within Sutro that dark superstition persisted, whispering, that the coyote last night hadn't wailed his miserere to the moon just to hear its voice.

Not so far as he, Jess Sutro of the Barcee, was concerned. And the thought held even in his red-eyed rage, rage directed toward Sam Rutledge, Jake Tompkins and all the lawless crowd with which he'd stacked the Palouse deck.

Fools and bunglers all, they were. With the whole game boogered, unless he could save some scraps of it upon his arrival at that lost pocket so aptly named Skeleton Canyon. For a very bewildered and no little scared rider had told him shortly

before that Frances Grayson and the Drake hombre were prisoners at the hidden line shack, which was the hangout of his rustler crew, from the accounts of that survivor a much depleted outfit that late afternoon.

Jess Sutro had seen the writing on the wall in the shape of two dust clouds, both forging toward him from Crystal City. To save his own skin he might, at the showdown, have to toss Sam Rutledge to the lions, along with Tompkins. For Sutro hadn't the slightest doubt but that those dust clouds spelled hard riding Saddle-horners, drawn here by the smoke or by other reasons which Dandy Sutro didn't like to ponder upon.

So, traveling fast, he and Tompkins turned off into the slitlike defile of Skeleton Canyon, an opening which would scarcely have been noticed by a stranger in broad daylight, no less while veiled with the mantle of dusk.

BUT the hawk-eyed rider on the pale maned buckskin, tailing the pair from covert of the timber, witnessed that sudden disappearance and knew the reason why. Also Rory O'Mara knew that entering such a defile in the dark, hard on the heels of Sutro and his ramrod, would be like walking into a den of rattlers at night.

But the Barcee twister didn't hesitate. It was whole-hog or none, now. He didn't know what was up in there, or who all, but he wouldn't be overlong in learning. Stopping only long enough to pad Six-Bits' hoofs with wads of tow sacking he took from his saddle *alforjas,* Señor O'Mara breathed a prayer and sent the buckskin through the slit, his sharpened senses feeling ahead like octopus arms, searching out the tiniest sound, the slightest hunch of danger . . .

Jess Sutro, standing in the dim-lit room of the cabin deep in the timber of Skeleton Canyon, stared with narrow, smouldering gaze at the two captives who sat on a crude bench against the lean-to wall, the girl and young man from Coyotito, gagged with dirty wads of flour sacking, bound fast with wrists behind them, and bodies lassoed to the rear wall. For several hours they had been there, cramped and uncomfortable, listening to Sam Rutledge gloat about what he aimed to do with them.

Stewart Drake's bashed shoulder had been bound up after a fashion, but the Broken-3 owner was weak from shock and loss of blood. And the Grayson girl hadn't come through unscathed, there was a smear of blood on her cheek, her blouse was ripped and torn, her red gold hair a tumbled mass. But the defiance in her violet eyes was undaunted as she stared out at her mockers in the front room.

"Got it all figgered, boss," gloated Rutledge. "The scrub's plumb dry above here. All we need is a match an a little primin', then this here shack an' all what's in it will go blooey! Don't reckon nobody could blame *us* if these two love-birds come here fer certain reason of their own, an' got burnt out by a brush fire!"

Sutro stared at the captives, gently stroking his mustache. That might be the answer. Certain the two must be disposed of, in the end. For his jig was up now; his stacked hand topped. Both savveyed too much to ever leave the Rib alive, but as for the girl—perhaps there could be a little delay, long enough for him to . . .

He had long desired her, but never had that desire figured in its scheme the marriage ceremony. To hesitate now would be foolish, because he stood unmasked before her.

"Wait outside awhile," he said crisply to Rutledge. "I'll call when I need you, Sam."

The Coyotito foreman stared, then a slow, brutal grin spread over his face. "More power to yuh, feller!" he leered. "C'mon, Red, an le's look at the moon!" and chuckling, the pair of renegades left the cabin.

The figure crouched just beneath the lean-to window with an eye to the aperture, lips moving in silent profanity, was busy with both hands while Sutro and Rutledge talked. With a sibilant hiss of warning to the taut girl who sat directly in front of him, Rory O'Mara sneaked a hand in, behind cover of her back, and with a single slash of his knife severed the thongs which bound Frances Grayson's wrists, then cut the body rope in twain without letting its lengths fall so as to be noticed. The girl helped there by suddenly slumping back.

No half-heart, that girl. Every fiber in her was true steel, she had courage and will power and swift savvy, and now she used all three. Not by an iota of expression did she betray the fact that she was loose; not by the bat of an eye disclose that Rory O'Mara had slipped his hideout gun to her, after severing her thongs. Even Stewart Drake, slumped near her side, wasn't aware of the miracle.

Señor O'Mara right then sensed, rather than heard, the slight motion behind him. Sensed it just as he prowled the cabin corner to peer through its lone window, as Rutledge and Red Cott started out. He wheeled like a startled wolf, hand streaking to his gun, and a hard hand vised on his wrist, as the bore of a .45 bruised his ribs under the heart. A second jabbed into his backbone . . .

"Plumb curious son, ain't yuh?" purred a brittle voice. "We been sorta expectin' you, feller! Pulled his fangs, Tusk?"

And when Tusk Martin had taken Rory's belt six, felt over him swiftly for a stingy gun, Jake Tompkins said, "Now, we'll mebbe satisfy some of yore curiosity, O'Mara. Yuh was goin' into the house—*git on!*"

"C'mere, Sam," Red Cott triumphantly yelped, "we done cotched ourselves a curly wolf!"

Rory O'Mara cursed himself for a dumb maverick. His lucky disposal of the guard placed in the Skeleton Canyon passage had dulled his caution just enough to trap him, by hell.

"The white-haired kid in person!" exulted Rutledge, shoving Rory ungently into the lantern-lit room. "The hairpin what likes brush fires, yeh! Look at 'im, Sutro! An' you too, lady! Cause he's my meat. The boss can have the gal, but this hairpin's *mine*. I'll show him what a sho-nuff fire is like, by Gawd . . ."

The knots rippled along O'Mara's lean jaws, but he said nothing. Merely leaned a little toward the spread-legged Sutro, moved a hand slightly as in hopeless gesture, letting a shoulder sag. In the short silence that fell the night sounds came clear, the murmur of a spring branch in the cedars, the sough of wind on the slopes, the yips of coyotes along the bench. And another sound, faint but plain—the drum of fast-stepping hoofs from the rib canyon —many hoofs!

Stewart Drake jerked up his head. The loyal puncher he'd secretly sent for the sheriff, and other help, that day before leaving the ranch with Sam Rutledge, had evidently gotten through with his word. Rutledge, Martin, Cott, all looked puzzled, uneasy. But Jess Sutro and his foreman, Jake Tompkins, knew what those drumming hoofs meant.

Sutro spoke, suddenly, crisply. "All right, Jake. And you two men," nodding to Tusk and Red, "go with him. See what it is. And, Jake, the drinks are on the house, *sabe? In lead!*"

Tompkins nodded, motioned to the two Coyotito riders. They left swiftly. Rutledge, bewildered and leery, started to protest but shut his lip when Sutro looked levelly at him out of eyes that were like black coals.

"I know what I'm doing, Sam," the Dandy hummed bleakly. "I imagine O'Mara, here, could tell us what happened to Streeter—on guard out there. For I spoke to Streeter, as I rode in . . ."

"You won't talk to him again, Sutro, said Rory O'Mara, "'cept in hell!"

"Indeed?" smiled the Dandy. "Well, O'Mara, we'll have a witness to the conversation—for you're pacing me in, ranny!"

Sutro took a half-step backward, dropped a hand to his pearl-handled Colts, the devil's own grin on his lips. Rory tensed for the slug as he started to fling himself at Sutro's knees. The gun tilted toward Rory but before Sutro could pull trigger, Frances Grayson shot him twice with that blunt nosed .44.

The cabin suddenly became humped-up hell. Sutro, lurching forward, drummed a luckless slug into the wall as he fell, barely missing Sam Rutledge, who, dodging wildly had, in turn missed O'Mara as he drew and fired, whose bullet snipped a lock of hair above Rory's right ear.

Rory, snatching the lamp from the table, hurled it straight at Rutledge's head. The foreman yelled and dodged as glass shattered against the wall, spraying oil over him, but when he triggered O'Mara felt the jolt and tear of smoking lead. He went backwards against the table, overturning it, slipped to the floor, and his fingers caught at Jess Sutro's fallen gun.

Rutledge howled like a madman in the flame-guttery dusk as a slug from the girl's weapon burned deep along his side, half-turning him. She stood in the lean-to entrance now, her steady hand directing those shots. He flung his aim toward her, eared back the hammer as Rory O'Mara shot blindly with Sutro's weapon from the floor.

The Grayson girl felt the drag of a bullet through her sleeve, even as she heard the incoherent scream of shock and agony that burst from Sam Rutledge. For O'Mara's hastily aimed bullet took him in the right cheek, tore out half his teeth and went through the left cheek. The renegade foreman dropped his gun, clapped both hands to his face and reeled against the wall, oblivious to all else that was happening about him.

Outside a band of riders barged up and flung off horse. Rutledge did not realize that the newcomers were yanking him outside, along with the unconscious Jess Sutro and suddenly freed Stewart Drake, who seemed unable to comprehend the swiftness with which things were winding-up.

The shattered lantern had set the Skeleton Canyon cabin on fire. Rory O'Mara, weaving there on unsteady legs, the whole right side of his shirt dark with blood and a cut across one eye, was telling the cock-eyed West just what he thought of Sutro, Rutledge and company in no uncertain language.

"I agree," said a soft voice at the end of it. "Agree perfectly with the Senator from Texas."

"Gawdamity, lady," said Señor O'Mara. "You still here?"

"I aim," said Frances Grayson, "to be anywhere that anything's going on."

The fuddled bronc-stomper bent over Jess Sutro a moment, looking at his wounds by the light of the roaring shack. Then he looked at Sheriff Tom Draper with a crooked smile. "He'll hang yet, mister, if he gits him a *dam'* good doctor! Just like Sam Rutledge will hang!"

He caught at his side, swayed. "Hell," he muttered thickly. "What's come into my legs—"

Whatever it was, young Señor O'Mara so lost count that he was wholly unaware of the indignity of having Miss Frances Grayson put both arms around him as he tipped sideways, and held him there so tightly that her cheek quite rested against his.

Young Mister O'Mara opened his eyes to the bite of red licker, gazed slowly about him. The shack still burned furiously, and a posseman was holding a quart bottle to his lips. Rory grinned, sat up, looked at the bandage which so neatly wadded his side. A peculiar bandage of pinkish shade,

and scented with something very strange and foreign to Mister O'Mara's senses.

"Well, gents," he said, frowning, "things sound fairly quiet on the Yukon. Am I to savvy that the fun's all over?"

"Yuh sir," said Sheriff Tom Draper. "And a good job she was, son."

Rory got to his feet, looked vaguely around. He waved away young Mister Drake's profuse thanks and scowled.

"Well, here's another stunt gone flat," he said wearily. "Thought I was gonna have a right smart time this 'un, but shucks! It turned out just like all the others. Just somethin' missin', that's all. Somethin' always missin', by hell . . ."

A slight sound back of him made him turn. "Oh, it's you, huh?"

"Yes," said Miss Frances Grayson, "it's I."

Came a silence, in which it seemed useless to wait for Mister O'Mara to speak. After nothing had come of his throat-clearing several times, and his gloomily fixed gaze upon the outer darkness.

"I bet I could tell you what it was," she said in a soft, small voice.

"What what was?"

"The something missing out of your adventures."

"Yeah?" Señor O'Mara tried to keep an even pulse, failed signally. He felt that same hot wave burning his face, and not from the fire . . .

"I think," whispered Miss Frances Grayson, "that, that maybe it's this!"

Leaning forward swiftly, she put her lips against Rory O'Mara's.

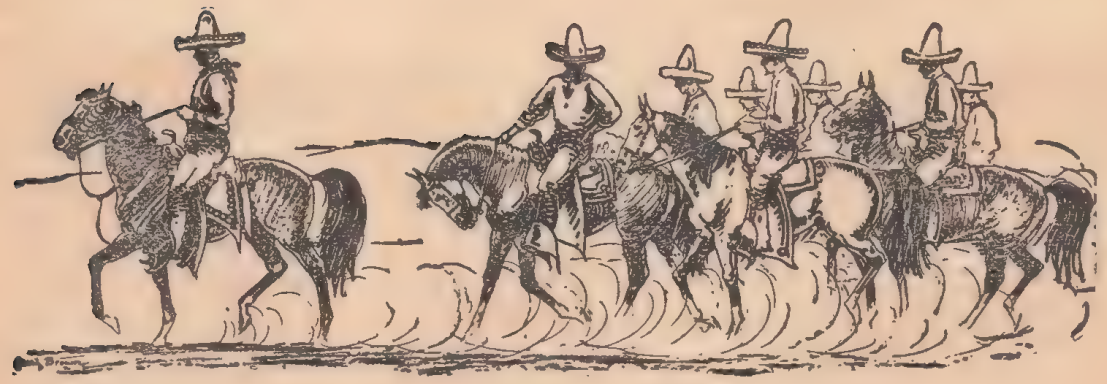
Sheriff Tom Draper wheeled at the yell that ripped Palouse's night air. Then paused, petrified, in the very act of grabbing for his gun. "I've found it, by cripes!" howled Rory.

"Found what, yuh danged kioty!" stared the high sheriff.

"What all I been missin'!" retorted Mister O'Mara. "From now on out, people, I'm raisin' steers instead of billy hell!"

And, balancing on the brink of that strange, mystic and unexplored territory which stretched so invitingly before him, Rory O'Mara's good arm went awkwardly but triumphantly about the shoulders of that gal from Coyotito.

THE END



The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

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APRIL FOOL!

Algy Proves His Sense of Humor

Holidays is always very joyous occasions, but it seems like the citizens of Cactus City have more fun on April Fool's Day than any other holiday. Maybe this is because there is (not mentioning any names) plenty of people at hand to be made fools out of.

Anyways, everybody had a lot of fun at it, even Algy Twombley-Twombley, which was very surprising as Englishmen don't go much for joking, because it is too hard to understand. But it was Algy who eventually pulled the best joke of the day maybe.

Of course, he didn't catch on to the idea of April Fool right away. For instance he didn't laugh at all when the cook out to his place started off the day by serving hot cakes made out of sawdust. And after breakfast, when Badger Bain lighted up his pipe and it exploded, why Algy only smiled, even though Badger looked awful funny with his hair and eyebrows burned off, and his front teeth blowed out.

But after a few more jokes was pulled off like that, Algy sort of tumbled to the spirit of the day. And because he is a good sport he figured out a little joke of his own before the day was over.

Just before sundown Algy come riding hell bent down to his south meadow, where all hands was working over some beef. He pulled up in a cloud of dust and hollered, "I say, gentlemen! A calamity has befallen us! The bunkhouse is afire, and all your belongings are burning up."

Well, of course everybody just grinned, until Algy pointed back over the ridge at a big cloud of smoke in the sky. Then all hands figured he wasn't fooling after all, and they cut the breeze for the ranch.

As they reached the top of the ridge, however, they all pulled up in surprise, because they could see that the bunkhouse wasn't afire atall.

It was then that Algy couldn't keep his face straight no longer. "April Fool!" he yelled. "April Fool, gentlemen!" Then he started laughing so hard he almost fell off'n his horse. He sure was pleased with his little joke, because he had fooled the boys completely. You see, it wasn't the bunkhouse atall that was making all the smoke; it was Algy's own house which was burning down.

MRS. HUMBUSSLE HIGH-TAILS IT

Cactus City Too Tough For Famous Reformer

When Mrs. Humbussle hit our town, she sure was bent on showing what a hell of a reformer she was. She first tried to reform her sister's husband, Sponge Spencer, as drunks is her specialty. But she didn't wean him a bit, so she looked around for another victim.

Learning that Tanker Thompson was a heavy drinking man, Mrs. Humbussle went out to his place and prepared to cure him. The first thing she did was to ask Mrs. Thompson, "Has your husband been drinking long?"

"Wal, I don't really know," allowed Mrs. Thompson. "You see, I only been married to him for twenty years."

Right then is when Mrs. Humbussle decided not to waste her talents in Cactus City.

RATE RAISED

No More Cheap Chiefs

Chief Bear Behind Him, up at the Indian Reservation, declares that hereafter the tribe is going to be more exclusive, and not make so many people Honorary Chiefs of the tribe.

Heretofore, just about anybody would be made a Honorary Chief, as long as they donated a case of whiskey to the Injuns. But Chief Bear Behind Him and his Braves are very proud people, he declares, and they will no longer cheapen themselves by honoring any riff-raff who happens to have the price of a case of whiskey. Hereafter the honor of being made a Honorary Chief will be reserved for only those gents who donate *two* cases of firewater.

WEEKLY APOLOGY

It seems like Leo Schilling, leader of the Cactus City Band, is always wanting to apologize to the public about something. This week he wants to explain that he shouldn't be given any undue credit for something that wasn't his doing.

After the concert last Thursday, everybody was exclaiming how extra-good the band sounded, and they praised Leo a lot for adding a new and very sweet sounding horn to the band. But because Leo is a very modest man, he disallows this praise, explaining that the new sound wasn't a new horn atall. It was made by a yellow dog who had sneaked into the bandstand to do its howling.

(Maybe Leo would do better if he took the horns away from *all* his—er, musicians, and let 'em howl natural.)

CORPSES CARED FOR

City Council Votes New Improvement for Cemetery

Just when the members of the Town Council was about to cut for first deal, at their weekly meeting last night, along came Mrs. Sidehill Sidney and delayed the game with a little matter of business. Of course, the Town Council don't ordinarily let no female interfere with their poker game, but they felt kind of sympathetic for Mrs. Sidney, who is just fresh a widow since about a week ago. The Councilmen held up their game long enough to all vote in favor of putting up a hog wire fence around the Cactus City Cemetery.

Now, maybe this will seem like needless and unnecessary expense to some of you citizens, but personally I think it was a very polite thing for the Councilmen to do, even if they wasn't spending their own money.

You see, Mrs. Sidney still feels kind of sad about her husband Sidehill, and the other day she went out to the cemetery with a handful of flowers to put on Sidehill's grave. But when she got there, she discovered the coyotes had beat her to it. The mortal remains of her husband had been dug up and drug away, which was very embarrassing to Mrs. Sidney, as you can see, for there she was with a handful of flowers and nobody to give them to.

HOT, NOT SCARED

Merchant Denies Malicious Rumor

Short-weight Weston denies the gossip going around about him. Folks are saying that Short-weight had the daylights scared out of him the other day when them bandits stuck him up in his store and left him hogtied on the floor. But he wasn't scared, declares Shortweight, at least not as bad as folks are saying. It was a awful hot day, he points out, and he claims that that was a pool of sweat he was laying in when found.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Special Announcement to Customers And Other Malicious Liars:

There has been a lot of slanderous gossip lately to the effect that I ain't running my eating place as scientific as I claim. Folks is saying that I ain't scientific because I serve ham which is off'n the right hindquarter of a hog.

Well now, folks, I know as well as you do that the right hind leg of a ordinary hog is tougher than the left hind leg, because most hogs scratch theirselfs with their right leg, which makes their right ham the toughest to eat. That is a scientific fact and all right as far as it goes. But I will go even farther and show you that I am serving you the best ham, even though it is from the right hindquarter.

You see, folks, all the ham that I serve at my place comes off of left-handed hogs.

After this I guess I better call my place The Super-Scientific and Sanitary Cafe, because there is a big difference between being Amateur Scientific, like you folks, and Super-Scientific, like I am.

(Signed) Sirloin Simson

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

Without any doubt, dudes is about the stupidest people in the world, they can't figure out anything until somebody tells them, and even then they probably won't understand. Take, for instance, that Kansas City dude who put up for the night at Pop McCoy's Metropole Hotel.

Pop says that right from the start that this dude appeared extra dumb. When he signed the register he allowed that he wanted a Private Bath. This seemed very funny to Pop, of course, because he couldn't imagine that anybody would want to take a bath in public. But he just marked it off as being part of being a dumb-headed dude, and he went ahead and gave the dude one of his best bullet-proof rooms.

But pretty quick this dude came downstairs fussing and fuming about his bath.

"The bath's right down at the end of the hall," explained Pop. "Can't you find it?"

"But I want a private bath!" says the dude again.

"Hell's Fire, mister!" exclaimed Pop, commencing to get impatient with that kind of stupidity. "You can have yore bath just as dang private as you want. All you have to do is close the door!"

SOCIETY DEPARTMENT

Society females sure is funny! They ain't satisfied with just having a good time and enjoying theirselfs. No, they always have got to be trying to outdo each other, because whoever puts on the Fanciest Entertainment is considered the Social Leader of the town.

All this winter is was horse and horse between Mrs. Dinwiddie and Mrs. Donnelly for this honor(?). But Mrs. Dinwiddie finally gets the Sociability Championship on account she gave the best entertainment of the year at her party last Friday. This party was called a Housewarming, even though she hasn't got a new house. But she got a new room on her old house, so it was very appropriate that this room got a warming so it wouldn't be left out in the cold.

Anyways, all the ladies enjoyed theirselfs very much. Some of them twice, in fact. They had such a good time and the Entertainment was so different that they agreed unanimous that Mrs. Dinwiddie is Social Leader of Cactus City, among a lot of other things.

Well, personally I don't see much point in being the Sociable Champion, but I do want to congratulate Mrs. Dinwiddie on being the most Progressive and Up-to-date Person in town. She is the first local citizen (not counting Algy Twombley-Twombley) to have a genuine bathroom in her house, complete with a white porcelain bathtub and other indoor conveniences.) Which is much better than bein' a society queen anyhow.

The Puma's Whelp

By

HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Outlaws of Purgatory Flats," *etc.*

If it was for a friend, Puma Apperson's kid could fight with teeth and claws as deadly as the old mountain lion himself

ARKANSAW Pinder was little, old, shriveled, scraggly-bearded. He had helped Ben Storm establish the Bar S ranch, had seen it flourish for twenty years. Then, sorrowfully, he had seen its great herds dwindle to less than a hundred head.

The decline began immediately after old Ben and his wife lost their lives trying to ford a swollen river in a buckboard. To their one lone son—darkly handsome, lean, so tall he had been nicknamed High Jack before he was full grown — life had lost its meaning since that tragic day.

The house was much dilapidated now. The back half of the roof was a sieve, in a rainstorm. So Arkansaw moved his and young Storm's beds into the living room during this latest of young Storm's frequent absences from the ranch. He had barely finished the task when High Jack, weary, dust grimed, wearing a red-stained bandana bandage about his temples, limped in with an uneven jangling of spurs and dropped heavily into a rocker.

"I rode my hawss nearly to death, Arkansaw; look after him, will you?" Storm's voice was oddly pinched. His sombre eyes stared blankly. "And when you've done that, old-timer, find somethin' for me to eat."

He took off his gun-belt and put it down beside his chair. Pinder's countenance lined with deep concern when he noted the empty cartridge grooves. His old voice gnawed.

"More trouble; huh? I told you what'd happen if you didn't cut out the wild stuff. Yeah, by godlings, I told you. Uh-huh, I shore did. And where is Low Jack?"

"Dead." The gloomy monosyllable spat out like dust. Low Jack Hibner, the last Bar S cowboy, had been short and squat. Bitterly, High Jack went on: "I buried him myself, on the south desert. Deputy Sim Ledlow shot him in town three nights ago—if this place wasn't so far out, you'd 'a' heard about it. There was a hell of a fight. We'd rode fifteen miles before I had

any idea Hib was hurt. Then he tumbled out o' his saddle."

"Dead," muttered Arkansaw, fingering his scraggly, grizzled beard. "So that's what Deputy Sim Ledlow was doin' out here day before yeste'day. Ast fer you two, but wouldn't tell what he wanted. Wonder Sheriff Ad Parks didn't come hisself, him bein' allus on the prod like he is."

"Ad Parks is dead too," High Jack said. "Hib got him. He thought Ad was goin' to shoot me, that's why. But they think it was me shot Ad! A dozen jiggers had jumped Low Jack and me—I mean, we jumped them—and just when it looked like all night for me and Hib, that damned big Puma Apperson bobbed up from somewhere. He grinned alright, but he never lifted a hand to side us, after him and all his low down tribe has lived on Bar S beef since I was a button! Well—old-timer, will you look after my hawss?"

PUMA Apperson's nickname fitted him perfectly. Built like a giant he had the grizzled, tawny hair and beard of a puma. Badlands-born, as were all the Appersons, he was a two-gun man and a killer.

Jack Storm had sent a Mexican amigo to town with word that had hurried the lawmen toward the Border on a bootless ride. He wanted a day or two of rest at home. Then, for the balance of his life, it would be owlhoot trails for him.

Around the middle of the next day Arkansaw Pinder drawled, "You ort to told 'em, Jack, it was Hibner killed Parks, and not you, ortn't you?"

"Hell of a lot o' good that would 'a' done!" Storm said. "Hib was my friend, Arkansaw. He's got a good old daddy livin' over in another county. That daddy mustn't know that his son fills a sheriff-killer's desert grave—only you and me knows it, and if it gets out you'll sure settle with me! I— What's that noise? Somebody's comin'—"

He rose swiftly, filling his hand, tensed for action. There was a soft pattering across the living room floor. But he relaxed as a boy of twelve or fourteen entered the dining room, halted and dropped the butt of an old, big-bore, brass-bound Winchester rifle with a thump that rattled the dinner dishes. He was barefoot and bareheaded, and in rags. His blue eyes possessed a striking clear frankness under his thick shock of tawy hair.

A queer, grin revealed Jack Storm's white teeth. "The puma's pup," he said, in a strange voice. "What's you doin' here, button?"

"Follerin' my nose," promptly answered Puma Apperson's one son. "How'd you know my name? Because it is Button. Daddy allus called me that. You're High Jack, ain't you? Yeah. He runned me off, daddy did. Too much work to keep grub for both of us, he said. He said I must come here and stay with Arkansaw, and he gimme this here rifle. I can shoot her fine, too. Daddy said you'd be gone from now on, and Arkansaw'd be glad to have me. That old coot there, that's Arkansaw, ain't it? Shore. Say, ain't you got any more cows 'n what I seen? Them's mostly scrubs, ain't they? Say, High Jack, listen. Gimme a chaw o' tobacker, huh?"

"Gosh—all—hemlock!" Storm gasped. "What the—"

"And a drink o' licker, too," Button Apperson hurried on. "A great, big drink. Forty-rod stuff. Got any, Jack?"

"Look here, you little devil!" Storm growled. "If Arkansaw wants to keep you here with him, it's all right with me. But if ever he sees you monkeyin' with tobacco or hooch, or hears you cuss just one single little bit, he's got my orders to take your britches off and give you a good, hard thrashin' on the bare hide—and don't you forget that!"

Little Apperson grinned. "Daddy is right there at a window listenin'. He brung me over, on his hawss, behind him. He'll

have somethin' to say about Arkansaw takin' my britches off to thrash me!"

There was a rumbling chuckle, and a tawny giant straightened in ragged retamas just outside the nearest dining room window.

"That there is a hell-fired smart younker, High Jack," he said "You gimme five dollars, and you can have him for keeps. Huh? Shore a bargain. Huh?"

Storm shot him a look filled with the most utter contempt. He had never known so low a thing. He reached into a trousers pocket for the last money he had, a five-dollar bill, crumpled it and tossed it through the window. The tawny giant caught it deftly, greedily. Storm bit out:

"Puma, I don't ever want to see your dog face any more. And the next time I catch you drivin' off a Bar S cow or calf, I'll kill you. Now get your lowdown hulk out o' my sight!"

Apperson leered at the frowning muzzle of High Jack's six-gun, and then vanished. Inside, the button put his big rifle down on the floor, eased himself over to the dining table and into a chair. Pinder shoved food toward him. The boy was half-starved. But he ate slowly and sparingly as though preoccupied with some inner unhappiness. He'd had only his father to worship. And now he was gone.

Gone. And he had sold him for five dollars! The hurt was deep.

WHEN High Jack Storm spoke again, his voice was gentle. Arkansaw Pinder was amazed. Had Pinder been wiser he might have guessed the truth — that Storm, half devil and half angel, at last had stumbled upon something that promised to become a genuine interest in life. Now—when it was too late!

"What did your mom say about you leavin' her, son?" Storm asked.

The answer came a full minute later. "Ain't got no mammy. Never did have none, like other folks. Puma told me I was hatched out of a egg layin' on a rock in the sun. That's what Puma told me."

Arkansaw laughed. High Jack frowned him back to silence.

"Don't worry about the mammy business, son," Storm said. "You're all right, and don't let anybody tell you different."

He gave the tousled tawny head a friendly pat, and turned toward the living room. From that moment Jack Storm received all the sheer idolatrous worship that had formerly been wasted on Puma Apperson. The button had a new god.

At sunrise on the next morning, the young ranchman was ready to ride the dangerous trails of the owlhooters. Arkansaw had rigged out the now fresh, big bay horse; had tied bedroll, canteen, and grubsack on the saddle with the utmost care. High Jack's Colt six-gun had been cleaned and oiled; every loop of his gun-belt held a fresh cartridge, and more were in his pockets. Pinder led the bay to the front gallery steps.

"Drive a couple beef cattle to town and sell 'em, Ark," he said, "and buy a supply o' grub and a full outfit o' decent clothes for Button. He's yet asleep, I reckon. I won't wake him up. Be seein' you, old-timer!"

"Mebbe," croaked Arkansaw. "Mebbe. Skassly expect it, though."

The younger man was about to toss the rein over his horse's head. But instead his right hand blurred toward his holster. His keen eye had caught the glint of early sunlight on metal that at first appeared to be lying on a ragged hedge fence twenty yards away. A barking voice spoke.

"Don't do it, Jack!"

Sunlight glinted on more gun-barrels above the hedge. With Sim Ledlow, the lank and granite-faced new Pine City sheriff, were three lank and granite-faced deputies. Slowly Storm put his hands up to a level with his shoulders. But the advancing trio did not desert their caution. An

odd smile twisted the prospective prisoner's lips.

"I see," he growled. "Puma Apperson told you where I was—for a drink or two, I guess. The lowdown Judas. You'd jail me, and let him go!"

"Jail's where Puma belongs," candidly admitted Ledlow, "but he's so slick we never could get anything on him. You ought to know that, Jack. Where's Low Jack Hibner?"

Storm did not answer. If he had had any doubt as to Apperson's being the informer, it was soon dissipated. Puma himself walked out of the hedge! Storm glared at him. Apperson leered in triumph. Sim Ledlow reached for High Jack's gun when the smashing tinkle of glass transfixed him. The barrel of a big-bore Winchester rifle had crashed through a living room window from inside, and steadied. A boyish voice half-screeched in its excitement:

"Anybody which touches Jack Storm, I'll blow him down—I'll do it—I sure will—git away from him, quick—*git!*"

They had jerked their faces around and toward him. The very blue eye that pinned the heavy old weapon's sights to the star on Ledlow's vestfront seemed to be fairly spitting fire. He had meant what he said, and they knew it only too well. Then the tawny giant stepped quickly toward his son. His voice showed the confidence he had in the strength of his hold on the boy.

"Put that rifle down, Button! You hear me? Put that—"

"Stop, Puma!" shrieked the boy, sliding the barrel of the Winchester slightly across the sash-bottom and toward him—"Stop, Puma! You sold me for five dollars, goddam you—stop right there!"

Puma stopped dead. He was suddenly ashen under his mountain lion beard. Button could shoot, and shoot straight, and he would do it! The sights went back to Sheriff Ledlow's badge. The small, curved brown forefinger seemed to be turning white with pressure.

Ledlow swore in a shaken growl and backed away from Storm. And his deputies were not slow in following his lead. With a quick glance at old Arkansaw, Storm spoke. A new note of love and pride filled his voice.

"Can you beat that?" Then little Apperson was yelling at him:

"Git on that hawss and ride, High Jack!"

"You'll go to jail for this, kid!" flared Ledlow, as Storm threw the rein over the head of his bay and swung up to the saddle.

"You sure better hadn't, Sim." High Jack's voice was cold, premonitory. He had his gun out of leather now. "You ain't jailin' any younkers. If you was to jail this one, I'd pull the whole buildin' apart and beat the hide off o' you with the pieces—you can take that as a promise. So long, Button, and much obliged to you, and if that dog-faced daddy o' yours breaks one hair in your head I want to know it!"

Keeping close watch behind him for the first few rods, he rode off, melting quickly into the distance. The button held his sire and the lawmen for a quarter of an hour, then let them go.

Arkansaw Pinder went inside and there found himself confronted by the stripling whom High Jack had called, at first, the puma's pup. The pup grinned defiantly and spoke.

"I cussed the plum' biggest I knowed, Arkansaw. Feel like takin' my britches off and thrashin' me?"

"Jack said I must, But I—I skassly—"

"Sa-a-y, that's right; he did, didn't he?" interrupted the button, his defiant grin fading out. "Why, yeah, he did, you bet. Well, go git you a brush, Arkansaw, and gimme a good 'un!"

He put the rifle down on the nearest bed and began to pull from his ragged trousers the rusted horseshoe-nail that had held those trousers up. Old Pinder had gone, but not outside for a switch. A lone

tear wandered crookedly across Pinder's withered cheek and was lost in his grizzled, scraggly beard. . . .

Jack Storm had made two miles in the general direction of the badlands when a sudden thought made him rein in sharply. A glint, half hard, half amused, lighted his sombre eyes. Once more he looked backward, saw no sign of pursuit. Then he reined his horse obliquely to the left, forded the low and shallow Bajo River, and in the cover of the cottonwoods that lined the banks of the stream turned obliquely left again.

PINE CITY was a sizable, old cow town. It had a thriving bank headed by a tight-fisted man—one Clement Browder. Elderly, angular, and axe-faced, was this Browder. He sat at his desk, in the private office which took up the rear of the bank building, checking and re-checking the payrolls of two big cow outfits.

Behind him a spur jingled. He looked around quickly, pale-blue eyes wide and suddenly anxious.

"How'd you—how—"

"Oh," drawled High Jack, voice low, "I just snuck in the back door there. You must 'a' forgot to lock it, though it ain't like you to be careless. Don't talk loud, Clem."

He had a hand on the butt of his gun. Browder gasped: "Why, don't you know every lawman in this county is looking for you?"

"Yeah, sure, I know," Storm said, with a glance at the stacks of money on the other's desk. "That's what makes me in a hurry, Clem. So we'll get down to business. Clem, fifteen years ago you rode into this town without a red centavo in your jeans, and my dad went on your note for a hundred dollars, and then he lost the hundred back to you on a crooked hawss race bet. Interest at six percent. Hundred and ninety dollars—"

Shifting his gun to his left hand, he began to pick up banknotes.

"Twenty, thirty, forty, sixty—"

"Hold on, Jack!" wheezed Browder. "You can't do that!"

"Shut up, Clem, or I'll take it all.—Eighty, a hundred, a—"

The money pocketed Jack back-stepped toward the rear door his Colt covering the banker. Clem Browder kept silent, but there was a crafty look in his eye. Then Storm was in the rubbish-littered alleyway and running for his horse.

THAT evening High Jack made his first owlhoot camp. It was in the badlands, at a half-dry water-hole with enough grass around the edges to keep his horse going for a few days. Here he slept, rose with the sun, kindled a fire and prepared breakfast.

Two hours later he had a visitor.

"What do you want here, Puma?"

Apperson's rawboned sorrel, blind in one eye, and limping stopped of its own accord. Apperson was careful to see that his big hands did not stray anywhere near the butts of his two .45's when he stepped from his patchwork saddle to the rocky ground. He had seen the daredevil, range-bred Storm shoot, and Storm looked trigger-itchy now.

"Yore fire smoke, Jack, is how I located you," said Puma, unctuously. "Don't never put green stuff on a fire. Well, hell, might as well tell you what I want. Me and you had ort to owlhoot together, Jack. You see, I know a heap o' things that you don't. That green wood, now. I—"

"It was dry wood," clipped the younger man. "You saw the smoke because you wasn't far off. You guessed I'd hit for the badlands, and was tryin' to trail me. Call-in' me a liar?"

The tawny one proceeded quite as though he had not been interrupted: "I'd be a help to you in a heap o' ways, Jack. To begin with, you could stake me to a

new hawss and saddle, and also I need new boots and a new John B. hat. You got plenty *dinero* now, and wouldn't even miss it. That fourteen hundred you got from the bank, y'know. Huh?"

"Fourteen hundred—" gasped Storm. "What're you talkin' about?"

"And some over," Apperson said, unperturbed. From a trousers pocket he fished a crumpled sheet of paper. Storm took the sheet and straightened it out.

"A reward notice wrote in red ink and signed by Sim Ledlow, sheriff." High Jack whitened under his bronze. "Wanted for the killin' of Ad Parks *and* holdin' up the Pine City bank to the tune of fourteen hundred and fifty-eight— Damn Clem Browder! I took the nearly two hundred that was owin' to me, and he put the rest in his own pocket; don't you see, Puma? —don't you see? Why, the miserable, thievin' rat! If I don't get him afire for this— What a fool I was for not takin' all o' that money! What a locoed damn fool!"

"They're nailin' up them notices everywhere, Jack," said Puma, absentmindedly clawing at his curly, tawny beard. "Five hundred for a reward, and lots o' people could use that much dinero!" His coarse face leered jocosely, knowingly.

"Yeah, includin' you," High Jack growled. "The truth is, dog face, you meant to work me for the price of a hawss and saddle, boots and hat, and then turn me up and get paid from the other side too! If you wasn't little Button's daddy, I'd drill you right here. But—that don't make any difference—I oughtn't give you a chance, but I will—go for iron, Puma!"

His sombre eyes were blazing. Apperson did not reach for a gun. Instead, he jerked both hands upward. Storm's lips twisted into a bitter and contemptuous sneer. Then Apperson hurried into his saddle and rode off through the stone rubble. He did not turn his great, shaggy head. Well enough he knew that the other wasn't going to shoot him in the back.

HIGH JACK lost no time now. He saddled his big bay, tied on bedroll, canteen and grubsack, and rode out a long canyon in the opposite direction.

"Fourteen, fifty-eight," he kept muttering to himself, and he swore a little. "Fourteen, fifty-eight. I sure did make a mistake there. But perhaps I can show Clem Browder that he made a bigger one!"

Puma Apperson drove his limping sorrel mercilessly through the barren hills until he had come to an ancient line shack at the western edge of the grasslands. There four horsemen waited for him.

"See anything o' our man?" barked Sheriff Sim Ledlow.

"Yeah, and he was ridin'," Puma answered. "If we hit the Hartsville stage road above here and foller it along the edge o' the hills to about even with Sidewinder, an' then cut in on the old Sidewinder trail, I think we can head him off. But we sure better hustle, Sim."

Wordlessly, identically grim, the five started for the Hartsville road.

Sidewinder was a ghost town deep in the hilly badlands. The vein of precious yellow had pinched out quickly, but it had been rich while it lasted. Forty rotting shacks and a rotting two-story building, which had served as a combination hotel and saloon, now stood empty and desolate, in the blistering heat and abysmal silence. Ghoulish monuments to the short, wild career of the place.

Although Storm had not been there before, he knew the location. It would be, he reasoned, a first-class hideout for him until the present hue and cry had subsided. But he'd had to ride slowly over the rugged terrain, and the sun was low when he pulled his sweating mount into the upper end of the scrub-choked old main street.

A line of tall scrub formed a thin screen in front of the sun-blasted larger building. From a point a hundred yards away High Jack's cautious, inquring eye caught slight movement in the main doorway beyond the gray-green screen. Quickly he halted his bay, unleathered his Colt, slipped to the ground and dropped rein. Soundlessly he crept forward to investigate.

A few minutes later, he stepped through the thin scrub line and confronted a tawny-haired, youthful ragamuffin who sat in the doorway with an old, brass-bound Winchester rifle across his knees.

"How'd you ever find the way to Sidewinder, Button," he burst out in amazement, "and what the merry blue blazes are you doin' here?"

Little Apperson grinned. He scratched one bare foot with the big toe of the other. "Aw, I rode here on the speckled roan, Jack. Brung some grub. Cover over the old trail. Been here many a time. Fact is, dad and me has lived here for—I dunno how long. Me and Arkansaw learnt in town yesterday that you'd hit for the badlands, and I thought you might came to Sidewinder and I could mebbe find you, and tell you what I got to tell you. Arkansaw, he thought I better come. But I got a sneakin' notion he mostly jest wanted to keep me out o' the fight."

"Fight?" echoed Storm. "What fight? And what was it you had to tell me?"

Button squinted at the late sun, put two fingers to his lips and spat importantly between his teeth. With one hand he caressed the barrel of the old rifle. "Well, me and Arkansaw drove two steers to town to sell 'em yesterday, like you said. But nobody'd buy them steers, 'count o' they said Clem Browder was goin' to run a 'tachment on all o' your stock, 'count o' you robbin' the bank. And old Arkansaw, he said they'd take the Bar S stock only after they kilt him and not before, and when I left he was oilin' up his hardware. Yeah. And he looked mad, too. You bet!"

High Jack's face seemed to snap into complete immobility. But a tense thin line of jaw muscle alone betrayed his rage. "Get your hawss, son. Stickin' to any old trail after dark ain't easy, so we better make as much time as we can while there's light. I'll leave you at the ranch house, and then Arkansaw and me will drive the cattle into the next county and sell 'em—if they're not already gone, with the old-timer in jail or dead. Hustle!"

LITTLE APPERSON had tied the speckled roan behind the dilapidated building, in the shade. He rose, shouldered the Winchester, and hurried for the horse. Storm had turned toward his waiting bay when he heard the button's suddenly hysterical voice:

"You turn me a-loose, you—you—damned son-seller!"

"Halt and get 'em up, Jack!"

The voice was rock-hard. It came from between two of the crumbling shacks across the bush-choked street.

Storm halted and wheeled, wisely elevated his hands to shoulder level, It was Sheriff Sim Ledlow who had spoken. Ledlow and his three deputies began to advance slowly and with caution, guns ready and menacing. They had planned the capture well, thanks chiefly to the Indian tactics of big Puma Apperson. Quickly then High Jack had a vision of scaffold and hangman's rope, with his neck in the noose—for something that dead Low Jack Hibner had done. But were he on the scaffold now, he wouldn't tell. Not that it could save him.

Then he saw his one desperate chance, to save himself from hanging. Immediately he took it. Up to a waist-high point the scrub was fairly thick. Like a plummet he dropped into this thicker scrub and out of the officers' sight, darted swiftly southward and escaped a quadruple blast of

whistling lead. Then he darted back northward and fired a high spot to give a false position, quickly ducked toward the south again and ran, bent low, for his horse. He could hear the sounds the officers made tearing through the brush the other way, and he grinned. His ruse had been even more successful than he had hoped.

Storm led his big bay for a few rods, swung up to the saddle and dug in spurs, heading for the old trail. He was safe, at least for the time being. He knew they wouldn't hurt the button. Sim Ledlow wasn't that kind. The kid was the least of the trouble.

A little before midnight, High Jack dismounted and tied his horse in the creek willows back of Bar S headquarters, then stole on foot toward the leaky old ranch house. As he had expected, it was entirely dark. He drew up at an open living room window and called the old-timer's name softly. Instantly Arkansaw Pinder was leaning across the sill. Storm told, briefly, of all that had taken place, and asked about the cattle.

"I fooled 'em there, Jack," Pinder said jubilantly. "After the boy left I rounded up what cow critters you had left, and put that old Sonora red grandpap steer in the lead, and drove 'em up to the Ringed H outfit without no trouble a-tall. Jim Hampton hates Clem Browder, y'know, and Jim said he'd buy every hoof of them critters, and said for you to git up there as soon as you could and give him a bill o' sale dated back and he'd have the cash waitin'. Huh?"

"*Bueno,* old-timer," Storm grinned, pleased. "I'm right tired out, and so I'll catnap couple or three hours back there in the willows—it might be safer—and be at the Hampton spread at daylight. Here's that hundred and ninety bucks I told you about. For you and Button—take it; I'll have plenty, what with the Hampton dinero. Besides, there's the little matter of twelve hundred and sixty-eight dollars that I'm to take from Browder yet. He owes me that the same as if he'd borrowed it from me. I'm charged with stickin' him up for fourteen, fifty-eight, you know. The difference is mine, and I aim to collect it. Be seein' you!"

He faded toward the creek willows. But rolled in his blanket on the ground sleep eluded him. An hour passed, another, and he still tossed restlessly wondering how he could make Clem Browder settle.

Then two shadowy forms came stealing down from the house. Arkansaw and Button Apperson.

"Back, are you, son?" Storm said. He sat up on his blanket. "Got anything to tell me?"

PINDER and the boy hunkered down in the darkness before him. The boy spoke at once.

"You bet I got somethin' to tell you. Ledlow and them talked a heap, Jack, as we rode out o' the hills. It was mostly about the Pine City bank. A lot o' Pine City folks is skeered, on account you robbed it so easy, and is takin' their money out, and Clem Browder has went to Dos Manos on the stage to bring in a big bunch o' cash to stave off what they calls a run. He expects to git back with it tomorrow. Goin' to stick the stage up, Jack?'

"With me helpin' you; huh?" eagerly breathed Arkansaw Pinder. "We'll git that twelve, sixty-eight that Browder owes you, Jack, huh?"

"Not you, old-timer!" Storm laughed, then sobered. "Button, you sure Ledlow and his deputies didn't follow you over this way?"

"No, sirree, they didn't. I watched. They rode for town. And Puma rode back toward Sidewinder, and then he turned north."

"I don't doubt that Browder has to bring in money or shut up his bank," thoughtfully said High Jack. "But he won't

get it in Dos Manos. He'll get it in Hartsville. That Dos Manos thing is a trap for me, Button! Ledlow knowed you'd tell me. That's exactly why they talked it where you could hear. There'll be a heavy guard trailin' the Dos Manos stage for the one purpose of capturin' or killin' yours truly.

"Well, I'll fool 'em. Clem Browder will likely be on the incomin' Hartsville stage tomorrow, and that's the one I'll stick up. He owns the line, Arkansaw, you know. Old-timer, here's somethin' that puzzles me. You said Jim Hampton had cash waitin' to pay for my stock. Nearly always he's broke. How come he's got that much money now?"

"Why," Pinder said, "Jim had a little hawss outfit over in Bledsoe County, and he sold it last week and got all cash, and he don't like Browder, and wouldn't bank the cash. Thought you knowed, Jack. Everybody else does."

"If I heard about it, I'd forgot," said Storm. "You, son. You're a rawhide-tough button, but you're tired now. Go along with Arkansaw and get a big load o' shut-eye. Good-night, you two; I'll be seein' you."

OLD man and boy went to the house to bed. Pinder couldn't sleep. He was awake when Storm rode past on his way to the Ringed H. The passing of yet another hour found his eyes still open and staring into the darkness. Then he rose and reached for his worn trousers and rusty boots. In the other bed the boy sat up, inquiring: "What's wrong, pardner?"

"I'm shore bothered," said Arkansaw. "I'm afeared Sim Ledlow ain't as simple as Jack thinks. I'm afeared the Hartsville stage is the one that's to be the trap for Jack, and not the Dos Manos stage. And so, Button, I aims to be on hand when the holdup is pulled off, to see if they is anything I can do to help Jack."

Little Apperson grinned in the blackness. "I'm goin' with you, Arkansaw. On the speckled roan."

"No—you—ain't!" declared Arkansaw, spacing the words for emphasis.

But when he left the house a little later, the button was with him, and across the button's slim shoulder was the big-bore, brass-bound Winchester.

Dawn was breaking fast when High Jack Storm dismounted and grounded rein before the rambling old Ringed H ranch house. The elderly Jim Hampton had not married, had lived there alone for almost three decades. Storm hallooed softly, had no answer, walked up on the gallery, hallooed again. Still silence. The front door stood open, and he could see through and into the living room. His eyes swiftly adjusted themselves to the dim interior.

In there Hampton lay, bloody-faced and still!

The ranchman had been struck across the forehead with some heavy instrument —a shot would have brought the boys from the bunkhouse. Storm's gaze swept the room. Over in a corner on old iron safe stood open.

"Puma Apperson turned back toward Sidewinder last night, Button said," muttered High Jack, "then turned this way. Everybody knowed about Hamp's money but me. Puma could easy kill a man with a six-gun barrel. Good time for it; I'd get the blame sure. I won't be caught here." And, swiftly as his reasoning, he was gone. . . .

At noon, the southbound stage almost ran into fifteen steers. The master of the reins did not guess that they had been driven into the road for the purpose of stopping him. He got down and ran ahead, shouting. A masked man with a gun popped out of the scrub, and the next second was reaching for Clem Browder's satchel. The other passenger, a drummer, put his hands up. Browder drew a .38. There were three shots. The masked man vanished—with the satchel.

He ran, staggering, for his hidden horse. A red spot grew on his shirt front. Jack Storm, Colt leveled, stepped out from behind the horse.

"Thanks, Puma. You saved me the trouble! Give me the dinero, Puma."

APPERSON, pale, surrendered the satchel. Storm took both his guns, heaved them far, ran for his own horse, mounted and rode. But voices from the scene of the stickup halted him. Button Apperson's and Arkansaw Pinder's! Then the bark of Browder's .38—and the bang of a big-bore rifle. Storm dropped the satchel into a thick clump of pear and spurred toward the stage.

"What's up, Button?" as he lay back on the rein.

The boy pointed to Clem Browder, who sat in the road with blood oozing from a bullet's furrow above one ear and pouring from a bullet-severed artery in one arm. Old Pinder said: "He shot at the kid, and the kid shot back, creasin' him. Somebody—uh, somebody else drilled Browder through the arm there."

"It was Puma Apperson," the Pine City banker quivered. "Robbed me—ten thousand dollars— But—I'm bleeding to death! Jack, please—help me!" Fear gripped and shook him in its chill grasp.

Enmity lost in sympathy Storm sprang from his horse and in a moment had a bandanna tourniquet clamped above the wound. Suddenly Storm's gaze narrowed. An idea, a way out of the tangle, crossed his mind.

"Listen, Clem." High Jack was speaking urgently. "You'll die if I take that off. It's my bandanna, and I can do as I please with it. Now own up before these witnesses, how much money I took from the bank—mistaken in the amount, wasn't you?—and also tell us if you owed me the hundred and ninety. Better decide quick!"

It worked. The rifle bullet that had struck Browder's head a glancing blow had dazed him just enough. He confessed to his duplicity completely.

Then a moan came from a little way out in the scrub. Storm hurried off, and came back carrying the tawny-haired, tawny-bearded Puma Apperson, whose shirt front now was sopping red. He put the giant figure down at the roadside.

"Your .38 got him, Clem. He's dyin'. Here, Button."

"No," said the white-faced boy. "He sold me for five dollars."

Puma tried to smile at the lad, tried to smile at Jack Storm. Storm was taking care of his kid. Yes, *his* kid. His lips moved stiffly in amends:

"It was me robbed and killed Jim Hampton. Not High Jack. You hear me, Clem?" In the rest he lied beautifully: "And it was me shot Ad Parks that night. Not High Jack nor Low Jack. Was there, you know. I—solemnly—swear. . . . Deathbed talk. . . . Clem, this clears him —don't it?"

No doubt as to that. When Apperson had passed, Storm brought back and gave to Browder the ten thousand dollars, the same amount he was later to borrow at a low interest rate for building the old Bar S to a greater glory than ever.

And at the apex of that glory there was a tawny-haired Button in cowboy clothes, who had a handsome palomino pony, and who approached High Jack each morning with idolatrous blue eyes and the phrase—

"Le's ride range, pardner."

Next Month!

Another moving story by the author of this yarn,

HAPSBURG LIEBE

CONCLUSION

THE DRAGON'S JAWS

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of the Jimmie Dale Stories and Many Other Mystery Masterpieces

CHAPTER XV

FOG

"WAN MING says I'm dying"—Garkmar's voice was painfully labored, a thin wheeze in it—"is that true, Thompson?"

It was not since early afternoon that Garkmar had spoken before, and now it was nearing evening. Roy did not answer at once. Indubitably true. The man *was* dying. In fact, several times during the afternoon he had thought that Garkmar was already gone. Not a pleasant question to answer—truthfully. Strange that he should have any sympathy for Garkmar! What was strange about it? Was one ever callous in the presence of death? He was hesitant, uncomfortable, searching for

evasive words to put into the mouth of Jim Thompson.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, sir," he said, cheerfully. "You know as how while there's life there's 'ope, and——"

"That's enough of that, Thompson!" As nearly as he could come to mustering a snarl, Garkmar snarled. "So I'm dying, eh? Well, I knew it myself. Don't talk like a bloody parrot!"

Roy was silent.

"Where are we?" Garkmar demanded. "We ought to be close in on Cheng-ping-wo by now."

"Yes, sir," said Roy. "When I was up on deck a little while ago we was running along about a mile off shore, and from what I could gather from the way the Chinks was chattering and pointing, and from seeing a lot of junks as was messing around what looked like the mouth of a river, I'd say Cheng-ping-wo was showing ahead. But what with the wind dropping and then the fog shutting down on us we ain't there yet, though I'd say we ain't far off for the Chinks are sculling her along in handy fashion."

"Fog?" repeated Garkmar as though he had not caught the word right.

"Yes, sir, and a rare good 'un," amplified Roy. "Thick as pea soup, as the saying 'as it."

Garkmar was mumbling something.

Roy, squatting on his mattress beside the other, leaned forward.

"Made good time," Garkmar muttered. "Tomorrow night—third night of eighth moon."

"I beg pardon sir?" said Roy solicitously.

"I"—Garkmar choked for breath—"I wasn't talking to you."

"Yes, sir—I mean no, sir," said Roy.

Garkmar relapsed into silence.

In the dim light Roy's eyes searched the other's face. Garkmar's eyes were wide open, but the stare was vacant and the man appeared to be sinking into a coma again. Roy's lips firmed grimly. Garkmar had been failing steadily since the morning they had left the *Huetan*. Certainly the end was not far off. And then? He had already striven to answer that self-question a hundred times. The yellow package, of course. Naturally! But after that—what? Well, it depended on what the yellow package contained, didn't it? He hadn't got any farther than that.

He flirted a bead of sweat from his forehead. It was hot down here in this filthy hole that, if it could be called by so grandiloquent a name, served as Wan Ming's cabin. And the air was fetid in spite of the vagrant wisps of fog that came drifting in through the open porthole. Porthole! Applied to a junk that somehow sounded absurd. But what other name could be given to a hole cut in the hull that was closed in inclement weather by a hinged, though ill-fitting, solid wooden shutter? And what did it matter if it were ill-fitting? Nothing to the Chinese! The apertures could be stuffed with bits of rags or anything else that was available if they leaked too badly.

Roy smiled queerly to himself. He had learned a lot about junks, at least about big, hundred-ton junks like this one, since he had come aboard. Where he had never

The Secret Headquarters of the Master Pirate of the East at Last Yields Up Its Secret

before connected portholes with a junk, he knew now that the ones opening off the main hold here were even big enough to permit the crew to get out on the footboards, or runways, from which, some four feet above the water line, they worked their sweeps when the wind failed them.

He could hear them working their oars now. And from directly overhead came the monotonous creak of the long sweep which, when the junk was not under sail and the rudder not in use, served both to steer and help propel the craft. He swept away another bead of sweat. No wind—just fog and the stench below here. He half rose to his feet to make his way to the deck to fill his lungs and nostrils with clean air, but a glance at Garkmar held him back. Garkmar was in too critical a condition to be left alone now even for a moment.

He looked around rebelliously at the miserable quarters that, together with Garkmar and Wan Ming, he had inhabited for the last few days and nights since leaving the *Huetan*. No furnishings. Nothing but his own and Garkmar's mattresses on the floor, and a bunk of sorts used by Wan Ming, the covers of which were nondescript and indescribably dirty. Nothing but a smelly confined space partitioned off at the stern of the junk, the only egress therefrom or entry thereto being through the door connecting with another, but smaller compartment, which was in turn partitioned off from the main hold of the junk, and from which a perpendicular bamboo ladder led upward to the deck. A sort of glorified ante-chamber and guardroom, this latter, in which Wan Ming's Number One and two other dependable henchmen lived. Wan Ming had an eye out for the preservation of his own precious skin. A pirate junk was a pirate junk, and a pirate crew was a pirate crew, and the Chinese were the Chinese! Wan Ming did not trust everybody—he had his bodyguard. Perhaps it was as well! The junk was manned by the scum and sweepings of Asia, but, at that, the most untrustworthy and treacherous scoundrel of the entire lot was Wan Ming himself.

ROY'S face was suddenly hard. So Wan Ming had told Garkmar that he was going to die, had he? Well, the reason for that bit of vicious information was not obscure. Wan Ming knew that, acting under instructions that had presumably emanated in a round-about way from their mutual chieftain, Lan Chao-tao, it was imperative that Garkmar should be in Cheng-ping-wo on the third night of the eighth moon; also, though Garkmar still hugged that yellow package to his bosom, still kept it tucked away inside his shirt, it had in the very nature of things been often exposed to view and Wan Ming had seen it many times. Only a mental defective, and Wan Ming was far from falling within that classification, could have failed to put two and two together. Again and again in the last twenty-four hours when it had become obvious that Garkmar was approaching the end, and contemptuous of the presence of the English sailor to whose ears Chinese words were but meaningless sounds, Wan Ming had plied Garkmar with subtle and persuasive questions. But all to no avail. Garkmar had kept his own counsel.

Wan Ming's mind had not been hard to read. Wan Ming knew a little—but not enough. There would be high reward and much aggrandizement at the hands of the mighty Lan Chao-tao if Wan Ming could step into Garkmar's shoes and carry out the latter's instructions. Granted! So why must Cheng-ping-wo be reached before the third night of the eighth moon, and what was to be done with that sealed package that was so carefully wrapped in yellow oil-silk? And so at the end Wan Ming was trying to force Garkmar's hand by impressing on Garkmar's mind the fact that he was dying. But Wan Ming had not succeeded even by resorting to such tactics, for the last time, say an hour ago, that

Wan Ming had talked with Garkmar, he, Roy, had been present and Wan Ming's probing had still been ineffectual.

Roy frowned. Why had Garkmar persistently refused to confide in Wan Ming? He did not know—but it seemed strange. Both men, as it were, belonged to the same unholy lodge. Both were under the domination of Lan Chao-tao, and it would seem that the logical and natural thing for Garkmar to have done would have been to pass on the torch to one of his own tainted brotherhood—but he hadn't!

Roy's frown deepened into a knotted furrow between his eyes. He was pretty much in the same boat as Wan Ming. He knew as much, but, from the standpoint of practical value, no more than Wan Ming did. He had counted desperately on Garkmar pulling through, counted on keeping a watch by hook or crook on Garkmar's movements, counted on discovering where and to whom the package was to be delivered, counted on bridging one if not more of the gaps that lay between himself and Lan Chao-tao, counted on reaching at least the outer fringe of Lan Chao-tao's inner circle. And now there would be nothing left but the yellow package itself.

Well, there was only one answer to that. He must depend on the contents to supply the open sesame to his goal; and where he had until now refrained from touching the package or showing any interest in it whatever, deeming the chance to watch Garkmar's disposal of it the more important, the actual possession of it had now alone become vital. But how was that to be accomplished? The possession of it was equally vital to Wan Ming. Wan Ming would never let him get away with the package if it were in Wan Ming's power to prevent it—and Wan Ming had plenty of power and to spare.

Not so easy! Wan Ming would be watching like a hawk. Yet in some way it must be done, and——

There was a sudden violent crash and shock that, though Roy snatched instinctively at the edge of his mattress for support, rolled him over sideways. Came then a chorus of yells and shouts from overhead and from without—but the junk was steady again.

ROY got to his feet and looked out through the porthole. Nothing very serious. They had collided with another junk in the fog, that was all. But he could hear Wan Ming's voice screaming in fluent vituperation at all and sundry on the other junk—mostly reference to their ancestors.

A voice answered Wan Ming in pacifying tones from the other junk. Roy, even at that short distance, could see only mistily through the fog, but he could make out the speaker to be a middle-aged Chinese, rather richly dressed in a short, black, brocaded jacket, who kept constantly pointing to an old and bent Chinese woman on the deck beside him. The speaker was desolated that through the unspeakable clumsiness of his misbegotten crew the accident had occurred. He had come from Canton, where he was a merchant, and was going on up the river from Cheng-ping-wo with his mother—identified by gestures as the woman beside him—to visit his natal village and the paternal tomb. Would the mishap be forgiven? He was, as it were, on a pilgrimage. All had not gone well with him of late. He had consulted a celebrated seer who said that his father's spirit was restless and displeased because the body's head and feet lay through the unpardonable stupidity on the part of some one in the wrong position. The position should be reversed—or something to that effect. Roy could not catch it all, but anyway the calamitous blunder was to be rectified and the fathers' spirit appeased. Wan Ming became more moderate in his diatribes.

More palaver—over nothing, thought Roy. What had a tomb or a pilgrimage got to do with a collision which was most likely entirely Wan Ming's fault anyhow!

The junks drifted apart.

Garkmar spoke suddenly, unexpectedly.

"What's the matter?" he demanded in a weak tone.

Roy turned away from the porthole.

"Bumped into another junk in the fog, sir," he explained. "No harm done and we're clear again, but these blighters are worse'n a pack of cats on a backyard fence."

"Come here and sit down beside me—close."

"Yes, sir," said Roy as he obeyed. "What is it, sir?"

"Listen." Garkmar's voice was no more than a whisper. "Tomorrow night. Can't go myself." Garkmar was forcing his words. "Got orders not to trust any Chinese because it's—it's written in Chinese. Understand? Very important. You—you'll have to go."

Roy felt his pulse quicken, but his face was impassive.

"Right you are, sir," he answered. "Anything you say. Where am I to go sir?"

"Up the river. Same side as Cheng-ping-wo; same side as—as though we'd come from Shanghai. Understand? Cheng-ping-wo at mouth of river on—on left bank going up. Go up river. About six miles. Old abandoned temple there on river bank." Garkmar struggled for his breath. "Go—go after dark. Don't let any one see you. Buddhist priest all alone at temple. People think priest is—is off his head—cracked. But—but he isn't. He—he'll understand." Garkmar tried to open his shirt, but was not equal to the effort. "Package in there," he gasped.

The man was going fast—his words so thick and low that Roy could barely make sense out of them.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I'm to give the package to the priest—is that it?"

"Yes, and—and say it's for—Lan Chao-tao from—from—" Garkmar's words ended with a convulsive movement of his lips.

For a little time Roy did not move. Here was more than he had ever hoped for, but death for the moment sobered anything in the nature of an exultant thrill. Garkmar was dead.

Then presently Roy leaned forward, and, opening the dead man's shirt, stood up with the yellow package in his hand—but as he did so some one coughed in a mock apologetic way behind him. He whirled round.

WAN MING was standing in the doorway smiling blandly. Also Wan Ming was extending his hand—for the package.

The smile was not disarming. Every muscle in Roy's body was tense. Whether any of Wan Ming's favored followers were in that outer cabin or not, he did not know. All he knew was that he had one chance, and only one—but if that succeeded he would have an ally out there in the fog.

The brain functions with incredible speed, and Roy's at that instant was geared in high. Perhaps a second had passed—no more. To take Wan Ming by surprise. Six feet between them. Roy covered the distance in a sudden leap, and, with every ounce of his weight behind the blow, his fist crashed full on Wan Ming's jaw.

There was a squeaky cry. Wan Ming pitched sideways, tottered, and, out of the corner of his eye as he dashed through into the outer cabin, Roy saw the man go sprawling to the floor.

The outer cabin was empty. Roy thrust the yellow package inside his shirt, sprang for the bamboo ladder and began to climb, but before he could reach the top the frantic screams and shouts of Wan Ming, who

was evidently scrambling to his feet, began to echo up from the inner cabin below. He heard racing steps overhead. Faces, forms, appeared before him as he gained the level of the deck. Again the element of surprise. They did not know what it was all about, and Roy did not intend that they should—until it was too late. He burst his way through the three or four chattering Chinese who confronted him, and the next instant dived from the side of the junk into the fog-mantled sea.

Chapter XVI

ON SECRET SERVICE

THE gathering darkness had joined forces with the fog. When Roy came to the surface after swimming to the limit of his endurance under water, he could barely discern the outline of the junk behind him; but shouts, shrill voices, a din that seemed to come from all quarters, sounded in his ears, while bullets spattered the water in ugly fashion around him.

He got his breath and went under again. If he could scarcely see an object as large as a junk, it was most unlikely that they could actually have seen his head above the water, but they were firing in his general direction and that was bad enough.

He had always counted himself a fairly strong swimmer in the ordinary sense of the term, but he could neither stay long under water nor cover much distance in that way. He came to the surface once more. The bullets were falling much wider of the mark than before. No good attempting to swim farther under water anyhow. He could not see the junk at all now—just the flashes from the shots—so it was definitely certain that they could not see him.

As well to put a bit more distance between himself and the junk, though! He swam on steadily for a few minutes, then turned on his back to lie still and listen, and if possible get his bearings in the fog.

The firing from Wan Ming's junk had become intermittent, but the shouts and cries from all around him, some distant, some near at hand, like some discordant ghostly chorus out of the fog were unabated. There could be only one explanation. There must be quite a number of junks in the neighborhood, their crews alarmed, excited and bewildered by the firing and uproar originated by Wan Ming. Yes, of course, he remembered now. He had told Garkmar about them—off the mouth of the river at Cheng-ping-wo. That's where they undoubtedly were, and he was, at the present moment.

But in which direction was the shore? He had plunged, he knew, from what had been the landward side of the junk when, before the fog had set in, they had been following the coast line, but that was by no means any assurance that the junk had been parallel with the shore when he had dived from it. All he was certain of was that the shore could not be more than a mile away, and was probably much less. But it would be rather bad business to swim blindly in the wrong direction!

An idea formulated itself suddenly in Roy's mind. The fog had obliterated everything, but now it had grown really dark and lights should be showing soon from some at least of these junks around him—and, if the fog lifted, from the shore as well. Yes, there was a light now over there a little to his right. He swam silently toward it—and touched the hull of a junk.

Voices reached him from overhead. No sound of sweeps. The junk was anchored. That was inspiriting. The shore might not even be nearly so far away as he had thought, though the fact that the junk was anchored was not necessarily any proof of that. He drifted along the hull of the junk and reached his objective—the stern post and rudder.

Here was support enough to last indefinitely. If the fog lifted during the night there were bound to be lights of sorts, as he had told himself, showing from Cheng-ping-wo which would indicate the shore line, and, in lieu of the fog, there would

be the darkness to cover his movements. If it didn't lift—well, he could only hope for a break of some kind. Nothing to worry about for the moment anyhow, but sooner or later he would have to swim for it again, and the first thing to do was to take off his boots. This he did, and, tying the laces together, strung the boots around his neck.

How long was it since he had leaped from Wan Ming's junk? Ten minutes at the very outside, he estimated. But in any case, though the firing had ceased, the hubbub from everywhere about him was still as great as ever—one junk's crew shouting to another—two or three all joining in at the same time—questions asked and answered. But, with the incessant chatter from the deck above him, Roy could make little or no sense out of the verbal exchanges that were going on between the junks.

And then another sound caught and riveted his attention. A small craft of some kind was approaching, a sampan probably, for he could hear the creak and swish of its single oar and the slap of water under its prow. Not nice if he were spotted! It was close upon him now. Instinctively Roy held his breath as he hung there rigid and motionless. The craft, a vague, shadowy shape, passed by him and bumped to rest against the side of the junk.

Roy relaxed. He had not been seen. But he could hear the occupant of the craft explaining now that this junk was the first one his unworthy eyes had discovered in the fog, that the people of Cheng-ping-wo were in great excitement because of the firing of many guns and the shouting of many voices, and that he had been sent out in his sampan to ask the cause of the not-understandable uproar.

A VOICE from the deck answered importantly that a foreign devil, who was a thief, had attempted to murder the great Wan Ming and had escaped by jumping into the sea. It was possible that the depraved one had been killed by Wan Ming's bullets; but, if so far he had preserved his miserable life, Wan Ming, whose generosity was known far and wide, would pay richly for the capture of the foreign devil. Also, if this were not known to the people of Cheng-ping-wo, it was well that they be told since the reward would be great, and where else could the foreign devil swim but to the shore?

The occupant of the sampan was instantly responsive. The logic was irrefutable; likewise cupidity was to the fore. It might perhaps be that the munificent Wan Ming had by now sent word to the village, but in any case the occupant of the sampan would return at once and in all haste to Cheng-ping-wo.

Roy's mental laugh was mirthless. A reception committee ashore! Well, perhaps—and perhaps not. Anyway, he must get to shore no matter what the risk.

He heard the sampan begin to move away from the junk. If the man could find his way out here in the fog, he could find his way back again. Roy slipped into the water, allowed himself to float well clear of the junk, and then, swimming noiselessly, followed the sampan.

But he had no intention of following it too far. Once he was sure of his bearings and had definitely located the shore line he would need no further guidance. The sampan was out-distancing him of course, but that was of no consequence—he could hear it and that was all that was necessary.

He swam steadily, strongly, and to his intense gratification found that the tide was with him. The minutes passed. He was at least keeping the sampan easily within earshot. And then suddenly he stopped swimming and raised his head to listen. It had been but a comparatively short swim after all. He could hear the man in the sampan calling to the shore, and voices quite close at hand answering him; also, though very dimly, he could make out now a number of tiny pin-points of light—Cheng-ping-wo, of course.

And now he could orientate himself without difficulty in view of the directions that Garkmar had given him. Garkmar had said that Cheng-ping-wo was at the mouth of the river on the left bank going up. All he had to do therefore was to keep Cheng-ping-wo on his left and he would always be on the nearer side of the river to Shanghai—which was the side that the old temple was on.

He swam still closer in. The voices became a Babel as though an excited crowd was congregating; the lights grew more numerous, but scarcely any clearer—one could hardly expect much brilliance from oil lamps and lanterns in any case. Pitch black and still the fog. Even if no more than, say, thirty yards out from the shore he would be wholly safe from observation; but at that distance he would surely be able to distinguish the shore line well enough to keep in touch with it, for he had noted before the fog set in that the whole stretch of coast along here was high-banked and quite heavily fringed with scrub and trees.

Yes, there was the shore line. He could make it out hazily now. He veered at once to the right to parallel it—this would bring him into the river itself once he had circled or had passed Cheng-ping-wo. The villagers would of course spread out along the shore in their search for him; but his first concern now was to put at least a fair distance between himself and the immediate vicinity of Cheng-ping-wo, and if possible get a little way up the river where he would have only the stragglers to avoid before he made any attempt to leave the water. Why not? He was still fresh, could take his time, and the tide would help a lot—it was running strongly and he could practically drift along on it without effort.

He swam quietly, hugging the shore line always, floating at times on his back to rest. Once or twice he heard sampans swishing through the water near him. The voices on the shore and the commotion from the anchored junks began to fade away; and after a time there were no lights to be seen anywhere. And then at last he headed in directly for the shore. How far he had come or how long he had been in the water he could not even guess, but he was tiring now, and it should be as safe here as anywhere to land.

His feet touched bottom. He floated in silently to the water's edge and lay there motionless for a little while. If any of the searchers had come this far, there was certainly nothing to indicate that they were now anywhere in the neighborhood for he could hear no sound around him. He got to his feet, crossed a few yards of muddy shore to where, he could see murkily, the river bank rose before him, and, climbing the bank, found himself on level ground amongst trees and underbrush.

He wrung out his clothes and flung himself down on the ground. He was a whole lot tired—far more so than he had imagined. Too tired to think except in a snatchy way. Six miles to go overland—but he couldn't go barging through the woods in the dark. God only knew where he'd end up that way. The only thing to do was to wait for daylight. No hurry anyhow. Tomorrow night, not tonight, was the third night of the eighth moon, and—

ROY drowsed off to sleep. He slept restlessly, wakened, slept and wakened again at recurrent intervals. But at the first showing of dawn, though there was still scarcely light enough to see, he was on his way.

His sleep, broken though it had been, had at least put him mentally on his feet. On the face of it, since he had no wish to reach the old temple until after nightfall, he apparently had all day and at least part of the coming evening in which to cover six miles, but as a matter of practical fact he had nothing of the sort. Garkmar's injunction to him not to allow himself to be seen had become ironically unnecessary. The whole countryside would be on the lookout for Wan Ming's foreign devil.

Therefore he couldn't travel by daylight, and he dared not put off the journey until night-time, not only because he was far too uncomfortably close to Cheng-ping-wo at the moment, but also because, even with the river to guide him, he might have great difficulty in finding the old temple in the darkness.

The only feasible plan to pursue therefore, it had seemed to him, was the one he was now putting into effect. He would go as far as he could up the river before it was actually daylight and any one was astir—that ought to give him an hour and a half yet, perhaps more. At the end of that time he would of course have to take cover somewhere and lie doggo during the day, but if the going had been at all good he should by then be quite close to the old temple, and, with luck, have even been able to locate it so that when it was dark enough again to hide his further movements he would have neither far to go nor any difficulty in finding his way.

And the going he found was not at all bad. At times the bank of the river was high and well-wooded; at others, the shore was low, flat and devoid of any sort of cover—except that furnished by the semi-darkness, for there was no longer any fog. He walked briskly when he could, more slowly when the trees and underbrush impeded his progress, and ran whenever the open stretches afforded him the opportunity to do so. It was hard to judge the elapsed time, or the distance he had traveled, but his average speed he knew had been good, and there came finally the moment when he was confident that the old temple could not be much farther away.

But it was growing light now—too light already to risk any further exposure of himself in the open spaces. A few minutes ago, for instance, he had been able to see almost across the river. There were several junks nearby, and one of them was quite close, much closer than he liked, inshore. And now from somewhere off to the left he could hear a driver's petulant voice accompanied by the slow thump and creak of wheels. The world around him was coming to life. He was quite all right where he then was of course, for here the bank of the river was high, steep and thickly wooded, and as long as the trees provided him with protection he could keep on going, but after that prudence warned him that it would be very definitely time to halt.

He went on for what he judged was perhaps another quarter of a mile, and then the trees began to thin rapidly, giving him an almost unhampered view of the terrain ahead. He stood still, his eyes searching the landscape. Luck! He could have asked for nothing better. For what he estimated to be a distance of considerably less than half a mile the ground was comparatively barren, then it rose to form a high, wooded bluff on the river bank—and there, showing through the trees, he could see portions of what appeared to be a decayed wall and behind it the roofs of buildings likewise in decay. The old temple beyond any question whatever! Also, a hundred yards to his left, he could see the deep-rutted road over which the creaking cart he had heard a little while ago had doubtless been traveling. The road, though, did not lead directly to the temple; it seemed to diverge around the bluff, presumably to continue beyond on its way up the river. Logical enough! What traffic could there be to a deserted temple that harbored only a lone and supposedly half-demented Buddhist priest? Perhaps in the old days the road had forked there, perhaps it still did even if the by-road had

long since been in disuse. In any case that was immaterial, for he could not possibly lose his way now when the time came no matter how dark it then might be.

A little way back Roy had crossed a small stream, little more than a rivulet, that trickled its way down to the river. He retraced his steps now and ensconced himself in a thicket beside the stream. Here was abundant shelter for the day.

The day! The entire day to put in! Not a wholly entrancing prospect, but there was no alternative. He did not propose to reach the old temple until after dark, for it would be folly to take any chance of being seen or discovered by the mad priest—who wasn't mad. He wasn't going there to deliver the yellow package; he was going there to be, he hoped, an unseen witness of whatever it was that was scheduled to take place on this the third night of the eighth moon.

HE TOOK the yellow package from inside his shirt and examined it critically. The oil-silk wrapping had preserved it perfectly. He applauded the foresight of Mr. Chu Sho-tung in preparing it in this way against the hazards of a sea voyage. What was in it? If it contained some vital communication written in Chinese, for which reason Garkmar had refused to turn it over to Wan Ming in particular, or any Chinese in general, for fear that it might be read—and he believed Garkmar's dying words—there was nothing to be gained by opening it. Speaking the language and reading it were two vastly different matters. He could not read Chinese. Better open it, though, just the same—even if he did believe Garkmar. He opened it. It contained nothing but a sheaf of papers covered with Chinese characters. Utterly undecipherable to him. All right, at least he was satisfied. He wrapped it up again as securely as he could. There was nothing to be done with it except—well, say, hand it over to MacNulty. If he ever could. He wasn't minimizing the risks ahead tonight, but no matter what else occurred one thing was certain—the priest who faked insanity up there at the old temple would never get it.

Tonight! What did he expect to do, or see, or hear tonight? Tonight was the third night of the eighth moon. Well, what about it? Suppose it was! What did it mean anyhow? He could not answer that—until tonight was over. But he remembered very vividly that conversation in the *Huetan's* boat when he had rowed Garkmar and that Chinese merchant out to the ship. Lan Chao-tao was soon to hold a council at a secret meeting place.

That inner voice that sometimes plagued Roy prodded at him now cynically:

"And if the old temple is the secret meeting place, and the time appointed is the third night of the eighth moon, and Lan Chao-tao and his underlords that the Chinese merchant talked about are to be there—what then? Do you expect to capture them all single-handed? No, of course not! But you'd like very much, very much indeed, to find out who Lan Chao-tao is. Of course! And then somehow, though God alone knows how, you'd make your way back to Shanghai and with the aid of the police trap your man. Excellent! But there is always a most excellent chance that, instead, Lan Chao-tao might find out who you are!"

Quite true. All of it. It was exactly what had been passing through his mind. A queer way, though, of expressing his thoughts! Yes, quite true—but, whatever eventuated, the cards this time would not be stacked by Lan Chao-tao when the showdown came. And that was all he asked.

HE TUCKED the package away inside his shirt again, and took out his revolver from the pocket of his dungarees. The grease-smeared cartridges were of course immune, and the revolver's immersion in the water wouldn't have done it any harm providing it was not allowed to rust. He broke the gun, extracted the car-

tridges and removed the cylinder, tore a piece from the bottom of his shirt which was now dry, and, with a stout twig to serve as a plunger, began to clean the weapon carefully.

His thoughts reverted to the old temple and the lone priest. What he hoped might happen tonight was one thing, but what might actually happen was another. He might be wholly wrong in his supposition that Lan Chao-tao would come here to hold his furtive council. He might as well make up his mind to that, and that he was going it blind except in one particular—the yellow package, according to Garkmar's own words, was definitely intended for Lan Chao-tao. It was supposed to be handed to the mad priest tonight, who, if he did not deliver it in person, would naturally then in some way pass it on to Lan Chao-tao. Therefore at least the obvious remained. Watch the priest. He would watch the priest.

Another thought came uninvited and suddenly to mind. The source and authorship of the inside information that had from time to time mysteriously reached MacNulty, and to which same source he attributed the letter exposing Mr. Chu Sho-tung that he had himself received. But why think of that? No reason at all; but now, having thought of it, the natural corollary presented itself in the form of another question. Did this informer, who on occasions appeared to know so much about Lan Chao-tao's intimate movements and at other times so little, know anything about the old temple, the priest, and the third night of the eighth moon? What was he driving at? Quite frankly, he had no idea. The question merely possessed interesting possibilities, that was all. Nothing to be gained by pondering over it.

Roy reloaded the revolver, restored it to his pocket, and stretched himself out in the thicket. He had not realized it before, but he was conscious now that he was beginning to feel hungry. Too bad! There was nothing to eat. Perhaps he could sleep.

Not only could he sleep, but he slept heavily. When he awoke the sun told him that it was long past mid-day. He went to the stream. One could manage without food for a goodly period if one did not have to combat thirst as well. He drank his fill and went back to the thicket.

But there was no more sleep. He lay there while several hours went by, his mind, as it so often did now when for long periods he was physically inactive, dwelling on the past. Not brooding. There was always the ache and loneliness that would not be appeased, but he liked to think about his father and about Myrna. It seemed to bring them nearer to him. And if at times he turned and lay with his face in his hands, and if at times the leaves beneath his body stirred and rustled faintly because his shoulders shook, they did so not scornfully, for what was there of shame in a strong man's tears?

And so, lost to his immediate surroundings, Roy lay there until, in the waning afternoon, suddenly aroused, he sat boldly upright. Rather faintly, but none the less unmistakably, the sound of firing reached his ears. It seemed to come from somewhere down the river in the direction of Cheng-ping-wo. It persisted; grew heavier.

Chapter XVII

THE OLD TEMPLE

ROY jumped to his feet, pushed his way through the thicket, and looked out over the edge of the river bank which, being high here, gave him a clear view. Down the river and perhaps three-quarters of a mile away a junk that was close in by the shore, though he could not tell whether it was aground or not, was afire. Smoke, shot with flames, great swirling volumes of it, shrouded the burning vessel to a large extent, but he could see that it was being attacked both by another junk that was near at hand and by some riflemen on the shore. For a time the firing was incessant from all quarters, for the attacked

craft replied in kind, then figures began to leap from the burning junk into the water, and gradually the firing died completely away. But the smoke was thicker now—settling down on the water like a curtain between himself and the scene.

There was nothing more to be seen, but he had little doubt as to the meaning of it all. Dog eat dog probably, he told himself. The Chinese of the pirate and bandit type that infested not only the sea coasts but the inland waters as well had no distaste for preying upon their own kind when the opportunity offered. An ugly little episode. There were not likely to be any survivors!

What time was it? Again the sun was his informant. It must be well after five o'clock. He returned to the thicket. Another two hours at least to wait before it would be dark enough to make a move.

But those remaining hours were not to pass unmarked by incident either, for, some half an hour later, another series of sounds caught and held his attention. Far different sounds this time, becoming more and more distinct, obviously from the road out there that he had seen, and approaching from the direction of Cheng-ping-wo—menacing shouts and jeers and vile-tongued commands chorused by Chinese voices.

Once more Roy jumped to his feet, but this time made his way through the trees to where, thinning, and though quite secure himself from observation, he could plainly see the road since it was, as he had previously noted, only a hundred yards away. And then, as he instinctively clenched his teeth at the sight that confronted him, he suddenly realized that he perhaps knew more of the meaning of the attack on the burning junk than he had before, since after all there were survivors—God help them! A middle-aged Chinese man in a short, black, brocaded jacket, and a tottering old Chinese woman, both with their hands tied behind their backs, were being pushed and prodded and hustled along the road by six vicious-faced, jeering Chinese in dirty and disreputable attire, all of whom carried guns slung across their shoulders, and at every few steps the lash of a whip descended in gratuitous cruelty on the back of the male captive and sometimes struck the old woman as well.

He had seen the faces of these two unfortunates no more than once before, and then only indistinctly, but there was no mistaking their identity. They were the Chinese merchant and his old mother whom he had glimpsed through the fog on the deck of the junk with which Wan Ming's had been in collision. And he had no doubt in his own mind now but that he could supply in one word the reason why they were survivors—ransom. A Chinese merchant from Canton on a pilgrimage to his father's distant grave must be possessed of money.

Was this some of Wan Ming's work? He was inclined to think so, though he was not at all prepared to say that he recognized any one of the six ruffians as being a member of Wan Ming's crew. Did it matter? It was a miserable spectacle and anger seized upon him, but there was nothing he could do to better the situation by so much as one iota. Even if intervention would avail anything, which it wouldn't with the odds of six to one against him, he dared not let himself be seen—he might better never have left England than do that now.

AND so he stood and watched the sorry procession as it went on up the road. There was no secrecy, no attempt at concealment on the part of the bandits. Well, that, too, fitted in perfectly with the attack upon the burning junk, than which nothing in the way of outrage could have been more blatantly and openly perpetrated. Who was to say anything? Who was to raise a hand against these vermin? No one, forsooth, in this sparsely settled countryside—not primarily through fear, though that factor could not be wholly ignored, but because, more likely than not, the

great majority of the dwellers hereabouts were in cahoots, silent partners as it were, with the outlaw element.

Captors and captives were near the bend of the road now where it diverged around the old temple on the bluff, and in another minute or so would be out of sight and——

Roy rubbed his eyes in startled amazement. They were very certainly disappearing from sight—but not around the bend of the road! Instead, they were heading in among the trees where he had conceived there might once have been a fork leading to the old temple.

They were going to the old temple! What did that mean? He was on the qui vive now. He did not return to the thicket. This was a vantage point from which, so long as the light lasted, he could keep watch, and which he did not propose to leave.

He was rewarded. At the expiration of what he knew could not have been more than half an hour, though it seemed much longer, the six bandits emerged from the trees, came down the road toward him, passed by, and continued on in the direction of Cheng-ping-wo. Some of the questions that had been thudding at his brain were now therefore partially answered, but the essential one of all was not. It was apparent now that the lone priest had not been reinforced by the eyes and ears, to say nothing of the physical strength, of six confederates, and that the two prisoners had been left at the old temple, with the priest undoubtedly acting as their warder; but what did all this portend?

Did it bode well or ill for the night ahead? It was added proof of course that the old temple and the lone priest were not all that they seemed, but would the two prisoners have been taken there if that was to be the scene of Lan Chao-tao's secret council meeting? Also he wasn't at all sure now, since he had seen the two prisoners taken to the old temple, that Wan Ming had had anything to do with that attack upon the junk down the river there, and much less sure that Wan Ming had sent those two captives hither—for if Wan Ming had known the actual truth about the temple he might easily have jumped, and jumped correctly, at conclusions instead of prodding Garkmar so constantly and fruitlessly with pertinent questions; and, bearing out this supposition, he, Roy, had gathered from remarks that had passed between Wan Ming and Garkmar at various times that Wan Ming came but rarely to Cheng-ping-wo, had not in fact been there for several years, and so it was a fair presumption that he had no intimate knowledge of the vicinity.

Roy's brain muddled on. Would this or would that happen? There were too many ifs. They did not clarify anything; arraigned against each other they only induced a greater confusion. Nothing was concrete. He would have to take tonight as it came. There was nothing else for it. Speculation would get him nowhere.

Twilight came. Then darkness.

ROY moved swiftly then—but cautiously. Keeping well away from the road to avoid any chance traveler, though he had seen no one upon it since the six bandits had passed by on their return, he crossed the open space in front of him, and presently reached the edge of the wooded tract on the bluff that surrounded the old temple. There would be a moon later on, he knew, but meanwhile here, as he began to make his way forward through the trees, it was utterly dark. He proceeded even more cautiously now, making no sound, practically feeling his way. The

crumbled wall, or at least such portions of it as he had seen, had appeared to be quite close to the outer fringe of trees, and so now could not be far away.

Nor was it. He came suddenly upon a heap of debris where the wall had fallen completely away, crept across it silently and stood still on the other side. He found himself even yet amongst trees, but it was not quite so dark here. The lower branches were well above the level of the ground, the trees themselves were wider apart and seemed to be in more orderly array—a grove, he imagined, possibly of dragon cedars, that had been planted by the priests in the thriving years long gone.

He was standing beyond doubt in some part of the temple court. He could hear nothing. There was no light anywhere to indicate the whereabouts, let alone the presence of the lone priest. He wondered with grim facetiousness what he would have done under these circumstances if he had been blindly and literally carrying out Garkmar's instructions? Shouted probably —and kept at it until he was answered. He wasn't shouting now—but where was the priest?

He began to skirmish about among the trees. He could see open spaces here and there, and could make out the shadowy outlines of several buildings. He had never visited a temple, but from what he had read he took these to be the one-time pavilions and quarters for the accommodation of guests and pilgrims, and the housing of the priests themselves. The temple itself he could not mistake, for it bulked high above any of the rest of the buildings.

No light. And, tritely put, a tomb-like silence. Just age-old shadows, that was all. A bit eerie somehow. But there was some one here despite the pervading air of desertion, and some one beside the lone priest. Those two Chinese captives. Where were they? Queer that there was no sign or indication of life anywhere!

Roy chose a spot beneath the trees directly in front of the temple proper, and separated from it only by a narrow strip of bare ground. This seemed to provide the best possible observation-post, for from here he could see what little was to be seen at all—the shapeless forms of the other buildings scattered about in the vicinity of the temple, and therefore, obviously, the coming or going of any one to or from these buildings in so far, of course, as the darkness would permit.

He sat down on the ground. All he could do was to await developments—if there were to be any developments. He was already dubious and uneasy, and he became more and more so as the time passed, hours of it he could have sworn, with still no sign of life from anywhere around him. Certainly, if Lan Chao-tao were coming here tonight no elaborate preparations were being made for his reception.

The moon came up. Still nothing to recompense him for this endless vigil. Where did he expect Lan Chao-tao to come from anyway? Shanghai? Well, why not? From the talk he had heard aboard the junk, Shanghai was considerably less than forty miles away overland. It would be quite feasible. Not more than a matter of a few hours if there was a road that was at all passable. And the others who would form the council? Where were they coming from? Who were they? A bit out of the way, this place—but then, of course that was probably why it was chosen. MacNulty, for instance, would never think of looking for Lan Chao-tao here!

THE moonlight began to penetrate the shadows in places and by contrast deepen them in others. It disclosed the fact that if there ever had been a door to the temple the door was no more; also that in one place at least the roof had fallen in, for a shaft of moonlight was striking weirdly down through the opening into an otherwise cavernously black interior. Roy was half tempted to explore it—but what

good would that do? He hadn't even a match.

Unless this whole thing turned out to be nothing but a ghastly fiasco some one must appear from somewhere sometime. But it couldn't be a fiasco. Garkmar had been lucid and desperately in earnest. A dying man didn't deal in fiascoes. The yellow package was a tangible thing. Those two Chinese prisoners who were most certainly here were—

What was that? It sounded like the opening and closing of a door somewhere over to his left. Yes! A figure, carrying a lantern, was emerging from one of the buildings there and was coming toward him, or coming rather, in the direction of the temple. And now, the moonlight aiding, he could see that the figure was dressed in a loose yellow robe—at least it looked like yellow, and probably was, though that might be the effect of the moonlight. The lone priest!

Roy was instantly and silently on his feet.

The man entered the temple. The light from the bobbing lantern grew dimmer as it receded, and as it did so Roy stole across the intervening space and crouched at the entrance. And now the light was as bright as before, for it had become stationary and he was again as near to it as he had been when the priest had entered the temple—not far away, perhaps fifty feet, but here in the shadows Roy could see without being seen.

The priest was standing at the far end of the temple entrance and was holding the lantern slightly aloft. His back was turned to Roy and he seemed to be working with, or searching for, something on the wall. Then the light suddenly disappeared, but he could hear the other's footsteps in a muffled way. The man seemed to be descending a stairway. Then the sounds died wholly away.

It was rather obvious. The priest had gone through a door—and had closed the door behind him, shutting out the light from the lantern. Roy tiptoed his way into the temple and across to the wall to, as nearly as he could judge, the spot where the priest had been standing. The moonray through the broken roof helped not at all. It was so dark here that he could see nothing. His hands felt along the wall. The wall seemed to be composed of carved wood panels, but he could discover no door.

But there must be one. He was too far to the right—or too far to the left. Try again. The priest couldn't vanish through a solid—

Roy repressed a startled ejaculation. Directly in front of him, and apparently through the wall, there began to show a thin thread of light that grew steadily more and more luminous. A crack in the masonry evidently. But where did the light come from? Definitely not from the lantern, for there was no sound of the priest approaching from the other side. Roy felt out with his fingers. Not a crack. A panel that had not been quite closed and that gave easily and silently under pressure.

He slid the panel back a few inches and found himself looking down a flight of stone steps into a circular chamber whose roof was everywhere supported by an almost forest-like number of large, carved, wooden pillars except in the centre where there was a richly lacquered table with seven high-backed chairs, three on either side, and one at the end that was more stately than its fellows. And the source of the light that had showed through the panel now became apparent. Pendant from the pillars and ranged around the side of the chamber were numerous candles and lamps which the priest was now busily engaged in lighting.

THE council chamber! The preparations for the reception were under way! Roy's lips were tight as he watched the priest. What was the man up to now? The priest, his task of lighting the lamps and candles completed, had opened a door

on the right-hand side of the chamber, and, still carrying his lantern, had disappeared through the doorway, leaving the door open behind him.

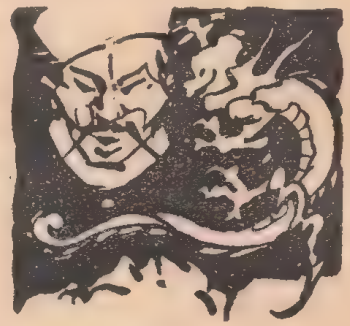
Roy listened. Again the sound of receding footsteps. He opened the panel to its full extent, which was doorway in size, and examined it. In the light flooding up from the stairs he could see that there was a quite modern spring-lock on the chamber side, though how it operated on his side, which was of course still in darkness, he had no means of telling — even if the mechanism had not been craftily hidden, as he presumed it was since the sense of touch when he had felt over it only a moment or so ago had disclosed nothing. In any case, if he could open the panel from the stair side he would at least not have shut the door of a trap irrevocably upon himself.

The priest's footsteps were still retreating—so faint now in the distance that he could scarcely hear them. He couldn't afford to be seen, that was axiomatic—*but he was here to see.* At the worst, any one of those pillars below there would hide him.

From the top step of the stairway Roy turned and slid the panel back as exactly as he could into the position in which the priest had left it. His tread was noiseless as he descended to the floor of the chamber, still noiseless as, moving from pillar to pillar, he gained a position close to and opposite the doorway through which the priest had disappeared.

He could see quite plainly. The priest was still lighting lamps and candles, but this time on a long, double row of rough-hewn posts that held in place the roof-beams of what looked more like a short, though unusually wide tunnel than anything else. Roy thought for a moment. It extended in the direction of the river, didn't it? Yes, unquestionably—but was that of any significance? Anyway, it didn't extend nearly as far as the river, for the priest was standing beside the rear wall now which was at most not more than two hundred feet away.

And then, as Roy watched, the priest disappeared once more — this time most curiously—as though he had sunk down through the earth.



The tunnel room, as Roy now styled for lack of a better name, appeared to be stored on either side, though by no means to full capacity, with all sorts of merchandise—bales, boxes, casks and loose articles were everywhere to be seen. He moved forward for a closer inspection—only to come to a sudden halt in the doorway. And there for a minute he stood as rigidly as though he were incapable of further movement.

Some twenty yards inside the doorway, hidden from him before by an intervening pile of merchandise, but now full in the light that played upon it from the lamp on one of the posts, he saw again on its jade pedestal the bronze dragon of Chapei.

Chapter XVIII

THE ZERO HOUR

ROY'S brain was chaotic. He couldn't be mistaken, could he? He reminded himself that there were thousands upon thousands of bronze dragons in China. Yes, but there weren't thousands upon thousands of magnificent jade pedestals such as this one in China or anywhere else —that mounted a bronze dragon.

He stepped forward through the doorway and stood beside the dragon—but his eyes were almost instantly attracted by still another object. Lying on the floor

beside the pedestal was a ceiling fixture still with its rose-colored bulbs that brought memory flashing swiftly to his mind. And nearby were pieces of furniture that he recognized, too. Also there was a huge rug, obviously Oriental though it was rolled up; and there were numerous straw-encased bundles that from their shape, it was not hard to guess, contained those vases whose outstanding beauty had not failed to impress him even under the unpropitious circumstances in which he had once seen them.

Here, then, were the entire furnishings of the reception hall of that house in Chapei from which he had so narrowly escaped—and these in themselves alone identified the bronze dragon beyond peradventure or doubt. He remembered word for word what MacNulty had said: When Lan Chao-tao moved out that night he took with him everything the house contained except one occupant and one piece of furniture."

A bitter smile flickered for an instant across Roy's lips—and was gone. His dead father tied in a chair. That was all that had been left. And so everything else, at least everything that had been in the reception hall, the only apartment in the house that he had actually seen, for that inner room had been in comparative darkness, was here, was it? He thought he knew why. It was in accordance with every move that Lan Chao-tao had ever made. Lan Chao-tao hadn't denuded the house merely for the sake of the intrinsic value of what it had contained; Lan Chao-tao had almost certainly transported and hidden these things here so that no single object that he, Roy, or any one else could afterwards identify, might crop up somewhere and afford a traceable clue to—Lan Chao-tao.

Roy stared critically down the length of the weird tunnel-like room in which he stood. Many of the bales and cases that flanked the rather narrow alleyway, formed by the double line of posts upon which the lighted lamps were placed, had been opened and the contents laid upon the ground—bolts of silk he noticed particularly were in abundance; also there were a number of new cases, their covers propped up beside them, ready obviously for re-packing. Loot. This, then, was one, at least, of the hidden caches where Lan Chao-tao revamped for market the proceeds of his piratical forays—though the occasional empty spaces along the wall were indicative perhaps of the truth of the statement the Chinese merchant had made to Garkmar in the *Huetan's* boat that pickings of late had been rather thin.

But nowhere, as his eyes searched about him, was there a sign of any other piece of furniture save that which was here in the vicinity of the bronze dragon. He nodded his head as though endorsing his own opinion. The probability was somehow strong in his mind, and this lent color to it, that, except for the reception hall, which, if his theory were correct, had been lavishly and luxuriously fitted up purely for the occasion and the impression it would make upon him, but little of the rest of that shabby, low-quarter house in Chapei had been furnished at all. A quite logical assumption. Otherwise, the balance of the house furnishings would be here too, wouldn't they?

He lifted the bronze dragon from the pedestal and examined it minutely. It was intact in every particular. There was not so much as a scratch upon it. It had kept its secret well! He smiled grimly as he set it back on the jade pedestal. He would know where to find it again! The third night of the eighth moon, whatever else it held in store, had at least opened auspiciously.

Roy started suddenly. He was in a rather exposed position here, wasn't he? Through the open door he could hear voices now and footsteps descending the stone stairs into the circular chamber. Well, there was plenty of cover. He dodged instantly behind a large packing

case that was near at hand and crouched there on the floor. And now, too, he could hear other voices — this time from the lower end of the tunnel room where the priest had disappeared. The priest was returning—and not alone. There was an entrance, then, to the tunnel room other than by way of the panel between the temple and the circular chamber.

He could move now in neither direction. Not so good—for the moment at any rate. From where he was he could only see obliquely a few yards along the passageway between the posts in the centre of the tunnel room, and nothing at all of the doorway leading into the circular chamber. He would be able to rectify that though, he promised himself, as soon as the priest and his companions had passed by. Meanwhile he could do nothing but content himself as best he could with what he could *hear*.

Not very satisfactory so far as the circular chamber was concerned—a confusion of voices, the shuffling of feet, the scraping of chairs as seats were evidently being taken at the council table. Better, however, here in the tunnel room. Here the voices were more distinct. The priest —Roy took it for granted that it was the priest—and those with him seemed to have paused back there along the passageway and to be engaged in some vexatious consultation. Chinese expletives. The repeated mention of machine-guns and traitors.

They were coming along in his direction again.

"Even in Peiping," said a voice angrily, "we are now so closely watched that—"

"The same is true everywhere," another voice interrupted in a tone that was both venomous and apprehensive. "The auguries have been unfavorable from the time the well-chosen Mr. Travers was appointed by Chu Sho-tung to carry out the commands of the Illustrious Lan Chao-tao and execute justice on the person of the execrable Morton Lang, for did not the esteemed Mr. Travers himself die on the return journey by a disease of the heart that suddenly overtook him? Yes. And after that was there not the deplorable matter of the diamonds that were never found? Yes. And then the ruin of many plans because birth has been given to a perfidious offspring, a traitor who is hidden amongst us. Some of us have made long journeys hither, but it is well that we have been summoned here tonight to take counsel."

"It is well," agreed the first speaker, "for there are many other ill-omens still unrecounted by your truthful lips. But see, the august Lan Chao-tao is already in his seat and awaits us."

They were passing by—in Roy's line of vision now. The priest in his loose yellow robe—it *was* yellow—a tall, cadaverous man with crafty and forbidding features, followed by two Chinese who appeared to be of the upper class, but were at any rate in rich attire—the two speakers presumably.

TRAVERS! Roy's mind was running riot. So it was Travers who had murdered Morton Lang! He had sometimes thought that it might have been Chinese Charlie, though he had also thought that it was much more likely to have been one of the many Chinese stewards. Travers was the last man he would have picked as the assassin. Exactly! That was why Travers had been chosen. "Well-chosen," that underlord of Lan Chao-tao had just said. Quite so! Travers had been only a casual shipboard acquaintance, but he knew the man to have been genial and well-liked by all on board, and to outward appearances always the gentleman. Mr. Chu Sho-tung must have selected the fellow from amongst his trusted criminal associates either in England or on the continent, though, if a foreigner, Travers' English accent had not betrayed him in any way. Execution! Judgment! Roy's hands clenched fiercely. But what was the use? Travers as an entity meant nothing.

If it hadn't been Travers it would have been some one else. Travers was dead.

That sing-song, whining voice, which was certainly not that of either of the previous speakers, and which seemed to come now from just this side of the doorway, was the priest's, wasn't it? The words were quite distinct:

"I will make known at once to the Illustrious One what I have explained to your Excellencies and that which your Excellencies have seen, for it may be that the Illustrious One will see fit to deal with the matter before I and all others who sit not at the council are commanded to depart and the doors are shut upon us. If your Excellencies—"

Roy's forehead gathered in puzzled furrows. Yes, it was the priest, right enough—but what the devil was the fellow talking about?

They had gone on through the doorway, their footsteps and the priest's voice lost now in the confused sounds that issued from the circular chamber. Roy edged forward and stole a glance around the corner of the packing case. He could see the doorway; but beyond it, with the exception of catching sight of a moving figure or two, the many pillars, which seemed to superimpose themselves with deliberate malice upon one another, obstructed his view miserably. He could not obtain even a glimpse of the council table.

The angle wasn't right, that was all. But how change it? He could not expose himself to view—the matter of angles worked both ways. What was he to do? He couldn't stand in the doorway! And yet he was just far enough away from it to prevent him from hearing clearly what was going on in there. Moreover, and what was of paramount importance, he wanted to see the face of *one man* in particular.

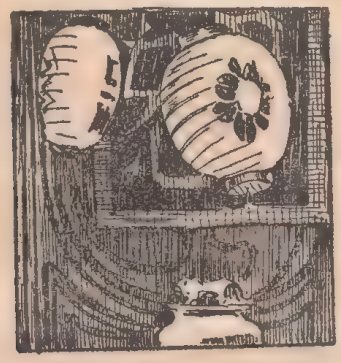
He wasn't going to be stumped, was he, just when success was all but within his grasp? It was damnably maddening! But there must be some way out of the impasse. Where were his wits? Well, what about the door? Wasn't that the solution? He considered its possibilities swiftly. The door swung inward on the same side of the passageway where he was crouched, was about three-quarters open, and was prevented from swinging back to its full extent by some carelessly scattered odds and ends of merchandise; also, it was a massive door and therefore the hinges must be massive too—and, depending on the size and type of the hinges, would be the width of the opening between the door jamb and the rear edge of the door itself. If he could drop down behind it! It would at least provide him with a totally different angle of vision, and, whether that was productive or not, he would at any rate be able to hear almost as well as though he were actually standing in the open doorway itself. The door was about twenty yards away. Could he reach it without being seen—by climbing over the almost roof-high bales and casks and cases that intervened? His lips compressed. It wasn't a question of could; it was a question of must.

But, though short, it was not an easy journey. He dared make no sound, least of all dislodge a cask or bale or box to send it tumbling thunderously to the ground, and there were times when there was scarcely room to squeeze through beneath the roof; but the confused sounds from the circular chamber still reached him—his ears were alert to that. Five minutes? Perhaps more. He was in a welter of perspiration as he finally gained his objective and dropped down behind the door.

There was a comfortable space here. The door was indeed massive, constructed of thick, solid timber, fire-proofed with a heavy metal casing, and when closed, he noted, could be securely fastened by means of a stout iron bar that, working on a pivot, would swing home into a socket which, though he could not see the latter, must obviously be affixed to the wall. And the same, of course, might be true on the

other side so that the door might be fastened either way at pleasure. He did not know. He had taken but little notice of the door on the way through—he had had eyes then only for the bronze dragon. And even now these material aspects seemed only as something inconsequential and extraneous that had intruded itself in an almost subconscious way upon his mind.

BUT that space between the door jamb and the rear edge of the door! He glued his eyes to it. It was wider even than he had expected. There was at least a two-inch spread. And, more again than he had dared to expect, he could see the upper end of the council table. But here was both an abysmal disappointment and a sudden sense of grim satisfaction. He could see Lan Chao-tao. One of the two councillors who had been ushered into the circular chamber by the priest had said that Lan Chao-tao was already seated, hadn't he? Well, he, too, could see that now. It could be no other than Lan Chao-tao who sat in the stately chair at the head of the table. But Lan Chao-tao's face was masked. He could see only the back of



the man's head sitting at Lan Chao-tao's left; but the face of the man at Lan Chao-tao's right was in full view. It was a very familiar face. Mr. Hung Tchen, the Chinese director of the British-Asiatic Bank! So that was where the leaks had come from! Mentally Roy apologized abjectly to Henry Anderson for his oft-time suspicions of the other.

"Yes," he added heartily under his breath, "and damned glad to do it, too!"

The three men in view were all in Chinese garb. He could see no others, but he could hear now, as he had anticipated, almost as plainly as though he were in the room itself. The whining, sing-song voice of the priest rose and fell, and the cryptic remark that the fellow had made to the two councillors was now no longer cryptic. The priest was talking, and apparently had been doing so for some time, about the two captives who had been brought to the temple that afternoon. And now he ended his narration abruptly.

The masked figure at the head of the table spoke with smooth incisiveness:

"Bring the man in first!"

That unforgettable voice! Roy felt the blood surging upward to his temples, and yet somehow he seemed to be strangely calm and unmoved.

The priest appeared in sight, coming swiftly toward the tunnel-room doorway, passed through, and continued on down the passageway between the lamp-lighted posts. Roy turned his head, but he could not see over the miscellany of merchandise that was piled high above him. But presently, at about the spot where the two councillors and the priest had halted in discussion on their way through, he heard the priest scuffling around and snarling out orders. So it was in here that the two prisoners had been confined—and had therefore, obviously, been thrust into one of the spaces he had noticed that were untenanted for the moment by reason of the scarcity of loot.

Dragging footsteps. Harsh, waspish commands. The priest was returning with the merchant from Canton. They came into sight a moment later as they entered the circular chamber. The prisoner, whom Roy now saw for the third time, was limping badly, his hands were still tied behind his back, and the priest, while he urged the other savagely along, was at the same time roughly removing a thick strip of cloth that, presumably to hold a gag in place,

had been bound around the lower part of the captive's face. Then the pillars hid them.

Roy could not see what was done with the prisoner, but a moment later Lan Chao-tao, at his ease in his stately chair, began to speak—like the purring of a tiger cat. Roy stirred disquietedly in spite of himself. He knew too well the portent of those casual, conversational tones:

"Would the high-born presence who, it was understood, was a merchant from Canton be graciously pleased to make known his name to his wholly unworthy listeners, and inform them also why the unmerited honor of a visit had been paid to Cheng-ping-wo by so exalted a person?"

PROBABLY, almost certainly, it was due to gag-swollen lips and tongue that the answer, which came from somewhere near the lower end of the table where it was now evident the prisoner had been placed, was so thick and low as to be almost unintelligible. All Roy could catch, and that only because he had already heard the story, was that the man was on a pilgrimage to his father's grave.

"It is regrettable," observed Lan Chao-tao commiseratingly, "that the music of the great one's voice does not ring clearly in our disappointed ears. Can it be that he is afflicted by some untreated malady that is even within our unskilled power to cure?" He waved his hand nonchalantly.

A piercing scream rang out and echoed through the circular chamber.

"Ah, that was better!" Lan Chao-tao was affable. "The voice was so quickly being restored to its much-to-be-desired natural vigor! So would the high-born now explain why there were so many machine-guns found on the junk of a peaceful merchant from Canton?"

The answer came steadily, though weakly:

"It was known to all men that there were many robbers and pirates upon the sea and upon the coasts and in the rivers. The machine-guns were for the protection of those aboard the junk."

Again the same question. And again the same answer, but this time terminated—as Lan Chao-tao gestured idly with his hand once more—in another scream of agony.

Again and again the same question, the same answer, the same movement of Lan Chao-tao's hand, and the resultant scream.

It was not a trial—it was the inquisition of a man foredoomed yet put to torture. It was abominable and horrible. Roy's hands clenched. Thank God, he could not *see* the victim's agony! How long must this continue? Not once had the man deviated in the slightest degree from his original answer, but the screams were becoming weaker, more like moans now.

The end came suddenly.

"The repetitions are tiresome," said Lan Chao-tao smoothly. "Perhaps the woman will be more versatile—*when she has seen her son!* Bring her—"

But Lan Chao-tao got no farther. Roy stiffened. From somewhere, dull and muffled, there came what sounded like heavy rifle fire. Then the crash of an explosion and the council table temporarily vanished from sight in a cloud of dust, smoke, and flying dèbris.

"A bomb flung down the stairway from the panel entrance!" said Roy between his teeth. "But God knows who flung it!"

Another bomb! Yells and terror-stricken shrieks rising even over the roar of the detonations. The one avenue of escape was through the tunnel-room door here. Figures were groping, stumbling, pawing their way toward it. Roy smiled queerly. Lan Chao-tao, easily distinguishable now by reason of his masked face, was well in the lead of everyone else. Yes, he would let Lan Chao-tao through—but not the rest. The bomb throwers, evidently bent on extermination, could deal with the others; he would deal with Lan Chao-tao—and Lan Chao-tao would not escape!

Lan Chao-tao was near the doorway now, but he was lurching badly, and ap-

peared to be wounded. A moment more and Roy heard the other stagger through the doorway and slump down upon the floor inside—and in that moment Roy slammed the great door shut and spun the iron bar home into its socket.

Chapter XIX

THE TUNNEL ROOM

POUNDINGS upon the door. Frantic appeals for admittance. Enemies all! Roy's face was set like chiselled marble as he wrenched his revolver from his pocket, and swung around toward the sprawled figure on the floor. Lan Chao-tao! The man was raising himself painfully on his elbows, and, striving to stand erect, succeeded only in attaining a sitting posture.

Roy stooped and tore the mask from the other's face. It was a Chinese face, of course; but the face of no one he could name by any other name than—Lan Chao-tao! Perhaps MacNulty could do better! But now nothing else mattered save that it *was* Lan Chao-tao, and, had he had any doubts about that before, the scar that disfigured the other's face from the corner of the lips to the bridge of the nose would instantly have set that doubt at rest.

The eyes of the two men met and held.

"You do not seem to recognize me—*Lan Chao-tao,*" Roy said evenly.

"Ah," murmured Lan Chao-tao blandly. "Forgive me if I was puzzled for a moment by your uncouth appearance. So we meet again!" He smiled whimsically. "What did you do with the diamonds, Mr. Melville?"

Lan Chao-tao was bleeding profusely from wounds on his face and neck, and was obviously in pain. Roy paid a mental tribute to the man's insouciance and essayed to answer in kind—but none too successfully, for he was conscious of the bitter, caustic note that crept into his voice.

"I left them in your keeping." He pointed down the passageway to the bronze dragon on the jade pedestal. "I fed them to your dragon and as they were indigestible they still ought to be in the brute's belly."

Lan Chao-tao's eyes followed the direction indicated, fixed for an instant on the dragon, and returned to meet Roy's again.

"I believe you," he said imperturbably. "Well played indeed, sir—as I think you say in England. I congratulate you, Mr. Melville."

The poundings on the door were becoming feebler, and the screams and shrieks more intermittent, as though those trapped within the circular chamber were rapidly succumbing to the shots that, though their sounds were deadened, were definitely being fired now in the circular chamber itself. But elsewhere the fight was still in progress. From directly overhead there was firing too—and suddenly a roof beam yielded, and earth and shattered timber fell upon the floor nearby. The attackers, whoever they were, were evidently well-equipped with bombs, or more properly, probably, hand grenades. Roy's mind was working swiftly. This was no safe place. Above, if he was not mistaken in the location, was one of those shadowy pavilions that he had seen, and in which now, evidently, the defenders, Lan Chao-tao's guards—that at least was obvious—were making a stand.

Lan Chao-tao was smiling quietly.

"I suppose that I am to congratulate you, too, on this surprise attack, but—pardon me if I revert again to your English phrases—I might remind you that one is sometimes hoist on his own petard. Another explosion above our heads may do more damage than the last, and we are both in equal danger. With your assistance, I am sure I could accompany you for at least a few yards away from here to where we would be less exposed, but"—he gestured toward the revolver in Roy's hand — "perhaps you would prefer to shoot and, so far as I am concerned, have done with it at once, Mr. Melville."

"I am not a murderer," Roy answered

coldly. "Nor, so long as there is no chance of your escape, an executioner either. Yes, we'll get a bit farther down the passageway. I'll even carry you if necessary, but—"

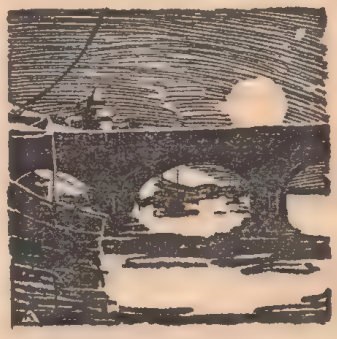
There was a deafening, roaring sound in Roy's ears. It seemed as though the earth itself were torn away from beneath his feet. One of the posts that supported the roof, as though uprooted and wielded by a giant hand, its lighted lamp gyrating in mad arcs, came hurtling toward him. He was conscious of a blow that seemed to lift him from his feet and hurl him yards away to the floor.

Half dazed he lay there for a little time. Then he struggled to his knees—only to fall prone on the floor again. He was fighting now to retain his grasp on reason. There was flame and smoke. Fire—perhaps from the exploding bomb itself, perhaps from the spreading oil of the lighted lamp on the post that must have been smashed when it struck the ground. Where was his revolver? Where was Lan Chao-tao? He could see neither. The fire was gaining rapidly. Evidently much of the stored merchandise was highly inflammable.

Again he tried to gain his feet, and this time succeeded. But movement was agony. He felt at his side. His hand came away sticky wet. He was bleeding—bleeding badly. But he had to get on, hadn't he? There was a way out of here—down at the far end of the tunnel room — there must be—where the priest had disappeared —the way the priest and the two Chinese councillors had come back.

He stumbled forward in that direction. The smoke thinned a little. And then suddenly he laughed in a distraught way. There was Lan Chao-tao. He could see Lan Chao-tao. Already badly wounded, even if he had escaped further injury from that last explosion, the man was not making rapid progress, but he was nevertheless well down the passageway and close to the end of the tunnel room. Who else than Lan Chao-tao would know better that there was an exit there? Lan Chao-tao was crawling along the floor, and dragging the bronze dragon beside him.

ROY gnawed at his lips against the pain and weakness that assailed him. A hell-born race—and hell must be holding its sides while it shrieked with unholy laughter. A man who crawled and a man who tottered upon his feet! He could go a little faster than Lan Chao-tao, though probably not fast enough to overtake the man before the exit, whatever that might prove to be, was reached by the other. But the race would not end at the exit. If there was still an underground passage to the river bank, as he was sure there was, there must be at least several hundred yards yet



to go. He could overtake Lan Chao-tao in that distance. If it were humanly possible to carry on, Lan Chao-tao could not get away. Perhaps Lan Chao-tao would not be able to go much farther anyhow. Lan Chao-tao was badly wounded too, and——

Roy clawed at his smarting eyes. The smoke was eddying in ever increasing volume around him, and he could hear the flames back there near the door of the circular chamber begin to crackle as the fire gathered headway. It wouldn't be long before the whole place was an inferno.

Ahead of him the lamps on the last two posts at this end of the tunnel room were murky spots of light—just enough to enable him to see that the exit, not five yards away now, was an opening in the floor,

the head of a stairway probably that led down to the shore level of the river, and that the crawling figure ahead of him had just reached it.

Five yards! But the distance wasn't measured by five yards—it was measured by the unconscionable time it would take to cover them. He tried to quicken his pace, tried to *run*—a pitiful failure except for a step or two. But Lan Chao-tao, too, still clutching the bronze dragon, had evidently measured the gap that was closing in between them, for he was now twisting and squirming frantically, though feebly, in an effort to lower himself through the opening before Roy could reach him.

Four yards. Three yards. God, they took so long! Lan Chao-tao's head and shoulders, and his outstretched hands that grasped the bronze dragon as he sought to carry it with him, alone showed above the level of the floor. Two yards.

And then Roy came to an abrupt halt. The dragon, an unwieldy object at best with its three-foot spread from jaws to tail, seemed momentarily to have caught its claws on the edge of the flooring, obviously causing Lan Chao-tao, tugging at it, to lose his balance, for with a wild, despairing cry, that was no longer that of a nonchalant Lan Chao-tao, both man and dragon suddenly disappeared from sight. And an instant later there came the sound of a dull thud and, faintly, the tinkle of splintering metal.

Roy stumbled forward then, and looked down through the opening. There was a steep flight of stone stairs, and below—was it twenty, or thirty feet below?—there was a dim light. Of course! He understood. That was the underground passageway to the river bank that he had already assured himself must exist. The priest had lighted lamps down there too. That was the way the two councillors had come in. But what held Roy's gaze was the crumpled, motionless figure of Lan Chao-tao at the foot of the stairs—dead. It couldn't be otherwise. No man so sorely wounded could have sustained that fall and lived. Yet that was not all that he could make out in the feeble light, for, a little beyond the lifeless figure, lay the bronze dragon, broken and dismembered now, and strewn around it, a number of little white paper packets. The diamonds! Lan Chao-tao dead! Strange that the diamonds should be lying there at the last almost at Lan Chao-tao's finger tips and yet, as they had always been, and now were forever, beyond his reach.

Roy clawed at his eyes again. The smoke was becoming thicker and thicker. Yes, but there was a current of fresh air coming up from below. The sooner he got down there the better.

His head was swimming dizzily, and his mind seemed suddenly now to be functioning only in a jumbled, fragmentary way. There weren't many minutes left to spare. How could there be? The flames were rapidly eating their way along the tunnel room toward him, weren't they? He could at least rest down there. Try to stop the flow of blood from his side. If he didn't, his—his number was up, wasn't it? Perhaps it was anyway. It wasn't only his strength but his life that was being drained away. Internal injury and—and all that sort of thing. The pain nauseated him. Made him damnably giddy.

HE LIMPED down a step, another—and stood there swaying unsteadily. *That old Chinese woman!* The mother of the Canton merchant that Lan Chao-tao had tortured! He had not thought of her before—he had thought only of Lan Chao-tao. She was back there somewhere in the tunnel room, and just as surely bound and gagged as her son had been. She would be burned to death of course, unless—unless he could manage somehow to save her. He—he couldn't leave her there, could he?

He climbed back up the two stair treads that he had descended, and as he did so that inner voice of his was to the fore once

more, battering at his brain—more ferociously and virulently than it had ever done before, it seemed.

"You damned fool!" it raged. "Take your one chance for life while you have it! What is an old Chinese woman to you? She's practically spent her life anyway. You've yours to live. It's a question whether you've even got strength enough left to save yourself, let alone her. How are you going to find her? You don't know where she is. And even if you find her what are you going to do? Die with her quixotically? Go back! Get out of here! You're so weak yourself that you couldn't help her anyway!"

Roy gritted his teeth. There was a miserable side to him, wasn't there? God help him, if it ever got the upper hand!

He got down on his knees and began to crawl. The air was clearer here near the floor. She couldn't be far away. It was somewhere down here at this end of the tunnel room that the two councillors had halted, and it was from down here too that not so long ago the priest had taken her son away.

He must look wherever there were empty spaces between the stacks of merchandise. She couldn't be anywhere else. Some of the lamps were burning, and the flames farther up the room were bursting through the smoke, and these two, combining, produced a spectral, unearthly glow, but he could see only with great difficulty. It wasn't the light so much—it was his eyes, smoke-seared and burning, that were failing him.

He zigzagged from side to side of the passageway, hunting, groping. To breathe was to cough and retch. The smoke and fumes were suffocating. And it was growing hotter—heat waves that seemed to scorch as though they were flames themselves. That inner voice was striving for utterance again. Damn that inner voice! He could still carry on, couldn't he? She must be here somewhere.

And then he found her. It was all smoke and blackness in here against the wall between the rows of high-piled casks. He couldn't see, but he could feel. It was the woman all right. He could feel the face, cloth-bound and gagged like her son's, feel the tied ankles and arms, and feel her move responsively as he touched her.

God, for a breath of air! His mind seemed to be faltering, sinking into almost a state of semi-coma. He fought desperately for sanity. She was still not only alive, but conscious. He couldn't cut her lashings. He had nothing with which to cut them. And there was no time to make a fumbling attempt to untie them here. The seconds were counting now. Air! His lungs seemed on the point of bursting. An old woman—cramped limbs—she probably wouldn't be able to do anything for herself even if she were released.

Dragging her, for he had no strength to lift her in his arms he crawled out into the passageway; and, dragging her, he crawled along toward the opening to the tunnel below, oblivious to the fact that his wound was taping every inch with blood. His cracked lips emitted a sound that he did not recognize. He thought he had laughed defiantly. This was a sort of ghastly plagiarism, wasn't it? Lan Chao-tao had crawled along here dragging the bronze dragon not long ago. Would the cohorts of hell applaud this second spectacle too!

HE CAME to the opening. Had the light gone out below? No—it was his eyes. They were streaming water, ached excruciatingly—worse than his side. It was his eyes that had gone out—leaving him near to total blindness. The light was still there—but it seemed no more than pin-point in size now.

The old woman lay like a blurred bundle on the floor beside him. He could not carry her down those stairs. He—he was too weak. He felt his senses leaving him. It seemed as though he were floating off

into space. But—but he must go on somehow. He could not let this be the end. It would be death here for them both. He thrust his head down into the opening and inhaled deeply, greedily. The fresher air revived him somewhat.

But he couldn't carry her down those stairs. There was only one way, brutal though it could not help but be on those stone steps—if even he had strength enough for that! There was nothing for it other than to drag her after him again.

He began to descend the stairs, swaying as he went. He could support her head and shoulders—that was all he could do. Her bound feet thumped and bumped from tread to tread. Even that guiding pin-point of light hurt his eyes cruelly. He couldn't see. He had to feel out with his feet. He couldn't go on much farther. Pray God, there was not much further to go.

At the bottom he stumbled over something soft and bulky. Yes, he knew what that was. It was the body of Lan Chao-tao. He won clear of it with his burden and sank down on the ground.

He had gone his limit. He knew that. But—but there was one thing left to do. Sooner or later the smoke certainly, and the fire probably, would be penetrating down here! The—the old woman must have her chance. *She* wasn't wounded, and——

He groped out and began to struggle with her bonds. It took a long time to untie the knots. He wondered in a queer, vague way if she hadn't already died from suffocation. Suppose that with his last remaining strength and in his last few moments of remaining consciousness he was freeing the arms of a dead woman!

But finally it was done—even to that cloth and gag.

"There—there must be a way out of here to—to the river," he gasped out feebly in Chinese. "If—if you can't walk, creep and—"

He was going out—floating off into space again, but this time he seemed to be falling through great depths, and though supporting arms seemed suddenly to be flung around him he was still falling—falling—falling. And there was the sound of voices in his ears. No, not voices—just one voice. It seemed to articulate with great difficulty, as if perhaps through some injury lips and tongue would not coordinate, or perhaps it was because the voice was yet so far away, but in his soul it still found recognition. It was the voice of one dead—the voice of one he had loved so well. It was as though he heard Myrna's voice from across death's threshold cry out to him in tender greeting: "Roy! Roy! Oh, Roy, beloved—"

And then he heard the voice no more.

Chapter XX

WHITE WALLS AGAIN

MacNULTY was uneasy and embarrassed. He always was when sentiment—so ill-becoming to the Superintendent of the Shanghai Municipal Police!—had a bit the better of him. He hid his sentiment now in jocularity.

"Well," he bantered, as he shook hands and sat down beside the bed, "I must say, Mr. Melville, you look a lot better this afternoon than you did when they brought you in here three days ago. You looked like hell then, if you don't mind my saying so. Maybe it's the haircut and the shave.

But even that is a promising sign. They don't barber the dying — until they're dead." He glanced portentously at his wrist watch. "My permit as your first visi-

tor is for half an hour. And Doctor Colter says that when he says half an hour he doesn't mean thirty-one minutes. There are a lot of questions I want to ask you, and maybe there are a few questions you'd like to ask yourself, so, since you've probably been getting fifteen-minute bulletins about Miss Lang ever since you knew you were back in the land of the living, give me a free hand for—er—well, official business, won't you?"

Roy grinned. Back in Shanghai. The same old MacNulty, the same hospital, the same white walls, the same Doctor Colter, the same nurse—God bless her! It was true about those bulletins. Miss Tanner had supplied them. An understanding soul! Witness that charming blush this morning when she had confided over the alcohol rub that she hoped to be married herself in another few months. The same everything—except himself. Physically he was pretty nearly as much of a crock as he had been when, a year ago and more now, he had lain here in bed in the hospital through those endless days. Internal injuries and some broken ribs this time, and it would be a week at least before he could hope even to sit up in a chair, Doctor Colter had said. But that didn't count for anything. There was a song in his heart now as against the black despair that he had known on that former occasion. Myrna wasn't dead. Myrna was alive. That voice, those arms around him when he had drifted off into unconsciousness in that tunnel below the old temple, hadn't been the delirious imaginings of a sick mind. It *had* been Myrna's voice and those arms had been Myrna's arms. The old Chinese woman! Myrna! True, Myrna was also here in the hospital now, but her condition was in no way serious. She had been near to suffocation and that, coupled with the violent treatment she had received at the hands of the bandits, had temporarily undermined her strength. Doctor Colter had insisted on three or four days in bed. Myrna was alive. And not only alive, but right here in this corridor only two doors away, and tomorrow —or the next day at the latest—both Doctor Colter and Miss Tanner had promised that Myrna would be allowed to get up and come in to see him. Why shouldn't there be a song in his heart? Myrna was—

"Well," grunted MacNulty patiently, "what about it?"

"Dear old chap, I'm listening," returned Roy innocently. "I thought you were going to ask me questions."

"Er—yes. So I am." MacNulty fished the same old briar out of his pocket and polished the bowl on the side of his nose. "So I am. I've just been in talking to Miss Lang, and—"

"How is she?" demanded Roy avidly.

MACNULTY grimaced.

"Dammit, she's all right! I've got her side of the story. Now I want to get yours—he glanced at his wrist watch again—"and there are about five minutes gone already. Hiding those diamonds in that dragon's belly was a cheery bit of all right, *I'll* say!—but you can leave out that part of your story for the time being as I've already heard it, since what little you've been able to tell Doctor Colter up to now, for he says you haven't been allowed to talk very much, he has of course passed along to me. What I want to know now particularly is how you got back here into China without anybody knowing it, and how you found out about that old temple? Miss Lang says you two weren't working in conjunction with one another, and that you didn't even know at the time that it was she, masquerading as an old Chinese woman, whom you pulled out of the fire."

"That's quite true," confirmed Roy. "But as for the rest, with the time limit you've set, I don't see how I'm—"

"Give me the high spots," suggested MacNulty. "That's all that's necessary now — the details can wait for another day."

"All right, then," agreed Roy—and sketched in rapidly a concise summary of what he had done and his reasons therefore since he had last seen the other here in Shanghai.

"Holy cripes!" ejaculated MacNulty, as Roy concluded his abbreviated story. "So that's how you got the yellow package we found inside your shirt, is it?"

"Yes," said Roy. "I knew you'd found it, for I asked Doctor Colter about it. Also, because I opened it, I know what was in it, though the contents meant nothing to me since I could not read Chinese. So here's one of *my* questions. What was it all about? Was it important enough to warrant all the fuss that was made over it?"

"You'd receive a decoration from Scotland Yard for getting your hands on it and holding on tight—if Scotland Yard awarded decorations," MacNulty smiled grimly. "I cabled a translation of it to Inspector Thornton at once. It was a report submitted by Mr. Chu Sho-tung of his activities covering the period of the preceding six months. A very enlightening document!

"Many of his agents, not only in England but on the Continent, were named. I've had a cable back from Thornton. Chu Sho-tung managed to commit suicide shortly after his arrest, but, between Scotland Yard and the Continental police, at least a dozen of his principal confederates have been rounded up. And, I might tell you, we're doing the same thing over here in the Orient now with what's left of Lan Chao-tao's crowd."

"My best wishes to you!" exclaimed Roy fervently; and then, abruptly, "Look here! You've heard Miss Lang's story and you've heard mine. There are some things I know through what both Miss Tanner and Doctor Colter have told me, but there are a lot of things I don't understand which I am sure would be clear enough if I had heard Miss Lang's story as you have. I know, for instance, that the man who called himself Lan Chao-tao was found dead down there in that tunnel, and that the bronze dragon and diamonds were also found. I know that neither Hung Tchen nor any of the other leaders escaped alive from the council room; and I know that Miss Lang managed to creep out of the tunnel and brought some of her men—they seem mysteriously to have been *her* men who had successfully attacked the place—and I was carried out, placed in the car that, I understand, had brought Lan Chao-tao across country to the temple, and, along with Miss Lang, was taken to the hospital here in Shanghai, and that, on Miss Lang's instructions, you were then notified of what had occurred. But—and there are so many buts—the things I don't know. I don't know how Miss Lang got on the track of Lan Chao-tao in the first place, how she gathered those men of hers about her and organized that attack, and how, even more bewildering still, she came to be upon that junk, and—oh, well, open up, won't you, Superintendent? You can't expect a man to get well with all that on his mind, can you?"

Superintendent MacNulty sucked ponderously at the stem of his briar.

"Oh, light it!" gibed Roy. "I can even stand the scrapings you smoke if you'll only talk!"

"Thanks," said MacNulty—and, tamping down the dottle, produced a match. The effect was almost instantaneous. Officially the Superintendent of the Shanghai Municipal Police had vanished. MacNulty was purring. "Well," he said, "you having told me all I wanted to know, that's reasonable enough. I don't want to steal any of Miss Lang's thunder, for there's a great deal, I imagine, that she'll want to tell you herself, so I won't go into details any more than you did; but"—there was a sudden quizzical twinkle in the steel gray eyes—"for the sake of your peace of mind during the next day or so before she is up and around again, I fancy she wouldn't

mind if I told you enough of her side of the story to make the pieces fit."

"Excellent!" applauded Roy. "But first, tell me this: Who was Lan Chao-tao? Have you discovered anything startling about him? Or was he just a heretofore uncaught super-criminal? In other words —just Lan Chao-tao?"

"Did you ever hear of a Chinese merchant prince by the name of Tu Shen Siang?"

Roy shook his head.

"Well, that's the answer. So far as you are concerned then, Lan Chao-tao was—Lan Chao-tao. But Lan Chao-tao was Tu Shen Siang. And out here in the Orient, natives and foreigners alike are still catching their breath, and the disclosure is still being head-lined in every newspaper from North to South China. Take the name of whatever Englishman you consider stands highest and is most honored in financial circles, say, in London, and read in your morning paper over the breakfast table that he is, instead, the head of a stupendous, international syndicate whose dividends accrue from crime and murder, and you have as near an analogy as I can give you to Tu Shen Siang of Shanghai alias Lan Chao-tao. We haven't had a chance yet to trace his career from its beginning, but we know of course that it extends over a long period of years during which Lan Chao-tao as an actual personality dropped out of existence, as it were, though he was careful to keep the *name* alive, not only as a cloak for many of his crimes, but to capitalize as well on the fear and dread that it inspired. At the end, as you have seen, he held in the hollow of his hand men like Hung Tchen." MacNulty shrugged his shoulders. "We have already identified the others that were found with Hun Tchen. They were from the south and from the north—and every one of them held a key position, either in the civil, military, political, or business life of the country. And," he appended wryly, "I might add that it was reported Tu Shen Siang had met with a grievous motor accident somewhat over a year ago, and though I saw him on numerous occasions in Shanghai, and though I was looking for something of the sort, I must confess I did not connect his facial disfigurement with you. So you see that even to a hard-boiled policeman Tu Shen Siang was above reproach!"

"I have an idea," contributed Roy with a thin smile, "that I'm lucky to be no more than a hospital case. Go on, please. Miss Lang's story now, Superintendent."

SUPERINTENDENT MACNULTY knotted his brows thoughtfully for a moment.

"Well, condensed, it's like this," he began. "It seems that from the night her father was murdered, she made up her mind to devote herself to an attempt to unearth Lan Chao-tao, and by the time she received that last message—you were with her that afternoon, you will remember—her preliminary plans were pretty well perfected. She did not wait for Lan Chao-tao to strike. She had previously drawn a considerable sum of money from the bank, so she was well supplied with funds; and she left her house in disguise that night through her bedroom window—and all of her servants loyally pretended that they thought she had gone to bed, though there was not one of them then but knew the truth. You know what followed. With her Number One Boy found murdered where he had been sleeping as usual outside her door, we all thought she had been kidnaped.

"I wouldn't have endorsed her plan, mind you—it was too much of a ghastly risk; but I have to admit that she was the one white woman in China qualified to see it through. She had been born here, had lived here all her life, and spoke Chinese as fluently as though it were her mother tongue, thanks to the amahs and other servants who had surrounded her from birth —and physically both her stature and fea-

tures lent themselves admirably to the rôle she proposed to play. She had faithful retainers to rally around her, not only in her own household, but amongst those who, though for one reason or another had left the family service, had still, whenever the need arose, been provided for over the years by both her father and herself. She had taken her amah, who looked upon Miss Lang as a mother would look upon her child, her house boys, and some of the old retainers into her confidence — and that night became the old Chinese woman that, as you have told me, you first saw on that junk off Cheng-ping-wo.

"She took up her life then amongst these lower class Chinese. She did not confide in the police for, as in your own case, she said she dared not risk the possibility of a leak anywhere, or the possibility that there might be spies of Lan Chao-tao even amongst the Chinese police.

"I'm afraid I'm not very original in this, but I think you'll get my meaning when I say that from then on it was the old story over again of the ever-widening ripples from the pebble dropped into the pond. These trusted ones of hers had fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and so on, and these latter had their intimate friends. It was in that way that she began to work, and it was in that way that she obtained her first result—much sooner, indeed, than she had dared to hope. She received a hint that in keeping a certain rendezvous on the Nanking Road you would only meet with treachery. It was Su Nan, her Number Two Boy, that she sent to warn you. You thought his face was vaguely familiar, but you did not recognize him under the grime and in his beggar's garb. Su Nan knew that Lan Chao-tao's men would be near you. His life depended on his disguise."

MACNULTY crackled another match. "That incident stumped me then, and always has until today," he said soberly; "but it's clear enough now, and in a sense it's the key to everything that followed. From then on, though she said Lan Chao-tao himself seemed always as far out of reach as ever, her sources of information widened steadily and to such an extent that she was able to obtain from time to time accurate foreknowledge of some of Lan Chao-tao's plans. And it was Miss Lang, of course, I know now, who passed that information on to me.

"But it was not until within the last month that she obtained the *one* piece of information for which she was risking her life—where to find Lan Chao-tao himself. And this time she did not pass on the information to me. She did not, she told me today, propose to take any chance of even a whisper reaching Lan Chao-tao to put him on his guard. I don't know" —MacNulty chuckled suddenly—"but that we ought to inflict dire penalties upon her for taking the law into her own hands—except that bandits in this country are always fair game!

"Anyway, she found out about the meeting at the temple long before it was scheduled to take place, and laid her plans accordingly. A visit was paid to the temple by a wandering beggar—Su Nan again. Su Nan didn't do so badly in spite of the priest's watchful eyes. He came back with the information that there were underground rooms at the rear of the temple and that, though he had been unable to find it, he was sure that there was a tunnel leading out to the river bank.

"Miss Lang qualifies as a staff officer. She armed thirty men carefully chosen by her retainers and their relatives, not only with rifles but with hand grenades to enable them to break through into the underground rooms, and started them out in twos and threes from Shanghai several days in advance as they had to make the journey on foot. Their instructions were to travel only by night, avoid all villages, and when within easy striking distance of the temple to remain under cover until a specified hour of the night designated when they were to rendezvous in the woods at the temple gate and launch their attack.

"That exit through the tunnel to the river bank that Su Nan had been unable to locate, Miss Lang made her own concern. She did not propose that any one, and Lan Chao-tao in particular, should escape that way. She manned that junk you asked about with a picked crew, and equipped it with machine-guns. Her plan was to station the junk after dark near the shore opposite the bluff on which the temple was built, and with the aid of flares after the shore attack had begun, pick out and command the exit from the tunnel if any one attempted to use it.

"But here, through no fault of hers, this part of the plan went awry. In preparing the flares on the way up the river from Cheng-ping-wo an accident happened. A charcoal brazier was overturned, one of the oil-soaked flares caught fire, and in short order the whole junk was ablaze. This attracted the attention of a nearby junk. A helpless craft and predatory 'rescuers!' That about sums up the situation. The fight began, Miss Lang's machine-guns came into play, but the smoke and flames soon drove the defenders overboard, and—but you saw the fight yourself from a distance. The attacking junk proved to be one belonging to Lan Chao-tao that, no doubt in view of what was to transpire that night, was doing something in the nature of patrol duty near the temple. The machine-guns excited suspicion, the crew met with short shrift, and Miss Lang and that devoted Chinese chap who posed as her son, and who, I am glad to say, finally came through alive though he had a narrow squeeze for it, were taken to the temple and—but you know what ensued.

"I THINK that puts the finishing touch to the whole picture—with perhaps one exception, though even that now is really obvious. I refer to the original ransom letter. Certainly your father's intention of going to the Orient was known long before he actually set out on the trip from England. We know that Chu Sho-tung posted that letter in London. Either, therefore, the kidnapping had been set for a certain prearranged day, or else a cable was sent to Chu Sho-tung that the kidnapping had just been effected. True, Scotland Yard couldn't trace any such cable, but an apparently innocent missive, its code hidden, for instance, in freight rate quotations and cargo consignment advices such as frequently passed in a routine way between Chu Sho-tung and his agents in Shanghai, in other words Lan Chao-tao, would naturally get by without question at Scotland Yard. In either way, therefore, the practical synchronization of the kidnapping in Shanghai and your receipt of that letter in London is readily accounted for—and the idea of the synchronization, of course, was to impress you with the 'magician's touch' that validified the letter and leave no doubt in your mind as to the fulfilment of the threatened consequences if you did not comply with its instructions. And so that's that. I did not intend to talk my head off, but you've definitely got it all now."

During the latter part of MacNulty's recital Roy had lain with his eyes half-closed as he had listened intently and without interrupting. He opened his eyes wide now as he shook his head.

"No," he dissented quietly. "Thanks

no end for what you've told me, Superintendent, but it's not all. You've slipped a point that, to me at least, is about the most important of the lot."

"And what might that be?" demanded MacNulty blankly.

"The reason," Roy pointed out, "why Miss Lang wanted everybody to believe that she was dead—and succeeded so convincingly when she sent those two house boys of hers to you with that story of her death."

"H'm! Yes, I did forget to mention that," admitted MacNulty, "though I asked her about it this afternoon. She said she wanted to stop the police from searching for her—that it only made it all the harder for her to keep under cover and play her part; and also, though he would of course know the story was not true, she thought Lan Chao-tao would almost certainly interpret it to mean that she had used it as a blind to effect her escape from China, and so he wouldn't search for her any more either."

"And do you believe that?" inquired Roy after a moment's silence.

"Why not?" returned MacNulty. "It sounds plausible enough, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes—quite!" said Roy casually. "Only I've an idea that Miss Lang fibbed to you outrageously."

"Eh — what?" ejaculated MacNulty. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Roy with a cheery smile. "That is, for the moment. If I find out I'm right, I'll tell you. All I wanted to know was what she did say to you."

"Well, you've found out all right," retorted MacNulty with a good-natured grumble, "though what you're driving at, I'm hanged if I know." He was suddenly staring, awe-stricken, at his wrist watch. He thrust his briar hurriedly into his pocket, jumped to his feet, wrung Roy's hand, and made for the door. "Been here *an hour!*" he whispered dramatically. "See you tomorrow—if I'm not caught going out!" The door closed behind him.

AND then a little later the door opened again, but so quietly and stealthily that at first Roy was not aware of it. Then he tried desperately to struggle into an upright position only to fall back on his pillows again—but his arms were outstretched.

The next instant Myrna was kneeling at the bedside, and with his arms around her Roy drew her lips to his.

Her face was all color. She hid it on his shoulder.

"Oh, Roy," she said breathlessly, "is it very, very terrible of me to do this? I stole out of my room without anybody seeing me. But I wanted to come to you so much. I would have been quite well enough to have come before in spite of what they said, only they told me you were not well enough yet to see any one—but they let Superintendent MacNulty see you a little while ago, and so I—I couldn't see why I shouldn't too. And so I—I'm here. The—the old Chinese woman whom you did not recognize, and who owes you her life, wants to—to try to tell you that what you did for her that night——"

"The old Chinese woman will try to do nothing of the kind!" Roy interrupted with mock severity. "And how dares she talk about recognition? She did not recognize me either that night."

"Oh, yes, she did," Myrna contradicted softly. "The very moment you dragged her out into the passageway where there was light enough to see. You weren't disguised, you know. But she couldn't speak to you because——"

"And yet at the end," Roy broke in tenderly, "I recognized her voice. She said—'beloved.'"

"Roy! Oh Roy!" she whispered.

Her face was still hidden on his shoulder.

He lifted it gently now to look into eyes that were wet with happy tears.

"Once, dear," he said a little brokenly, "you made me a promise. Do you remember? You promised that wherever you

were you would let me hear from you. Why didn't you keep that promise?"

"I—I couldn't, Roy." The color was flooding her face again.

"Perhaps I know why. Was it for the same reason that you tried to make us all believe that you were dead?"

"I—I explained that to Superintendent MacNulty. Didn't he tell you?"

"Yes, I know what you told him, but tell me the truth. You wouldn't have brought what you knew would be hopeless grief and sorrow to those who loved you unless you had a stronger reason than you gave MacNulty. Tell me what that reason was, Myrna. It's one, isn't it—I'm daring to hope so anyway—that means everything and all to me?"

She nodded her head, her lips were quivering—and then her face was hidden again on his shoulder and his arms were tight around her as she knelt there at the bedside.

"Yes, Roy, you know," she said tremulously. "There—there wasn't anything else that I could do. I was afraid—so terribly afraid for you. You had not only outwitted Lan Shao-tao, but had marred him for life. Your only chance was to leave China. You—you had never told me that you loved me, but—but somehow I—I was sure you did. And—and—so I was sure that you would never—never leave China if there were even a chance that I was still alive, and—and that you could——"

There was a knock upon the door—but neither heard it.

The door opened and Miss Tanner put in her head.

"Oh, I—I beg your pardon," she gasped—and hastily closed the door again.

She was an understanding person.

THE END

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PART III

RED CLARK ON THE BORDER

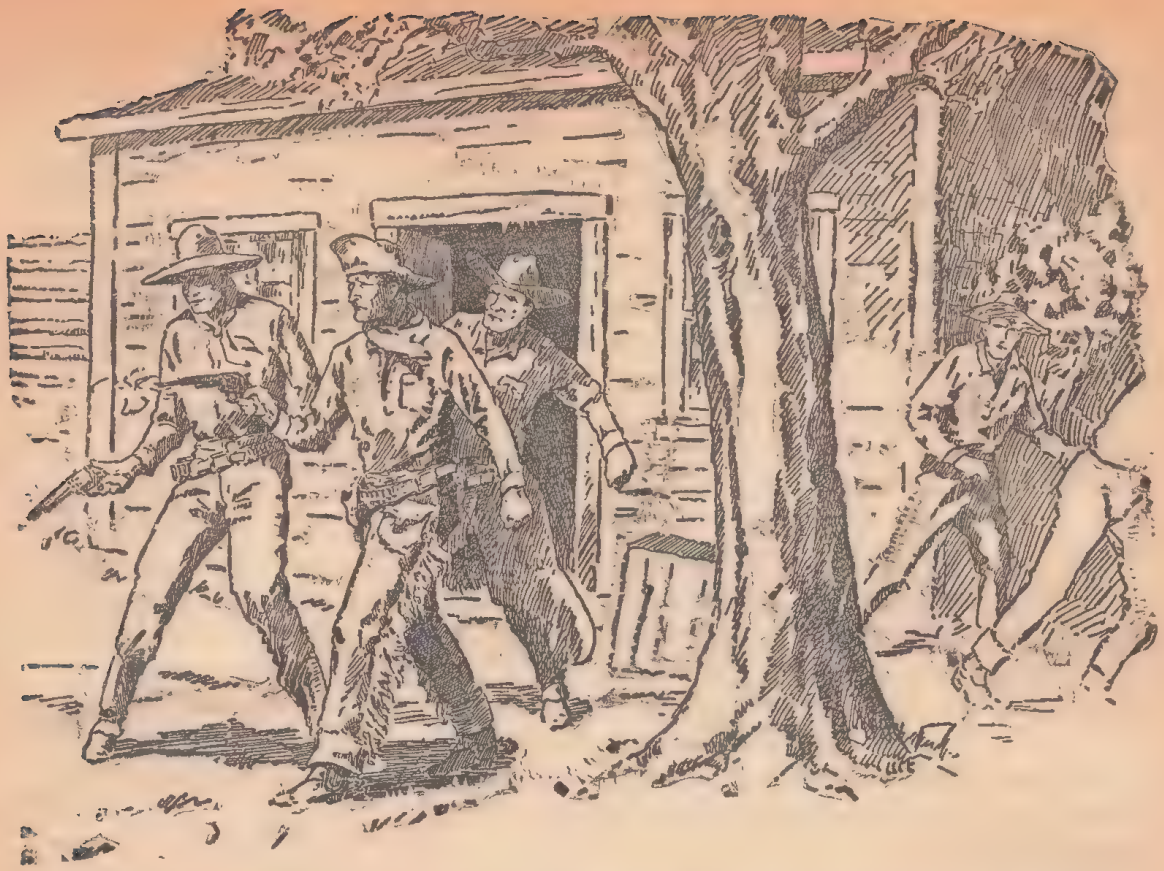
By GORDON YOUNG

Author of Many Stories of That Fighting Hellion, Red Clark

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

RED CLARK—you know, Red Clark of Tulluco—heard that Juilos County was "bad, plumb bad," so came to nose around, get himself a job. His first encounter in La Rez, county-seat, was with Zee Hill, journeyman printer, whose great desire was to get out a paper which would really tell the truth about some of the high-handed doings of various citizens of those parts.

Red, who was mighty quick on the trigger, heralded his appearance in town by telling Jim Suack, boss of Juilos County, that he was a horse thief and that night got shot at through the window of his hotel room. His comment on this occurrence was, "Feller, I bet I been missed before now by better shots than you!" Red also encountered "Colonel" Dick, news-



Red Clark—He's a Good Boy Not to Have Trouble With; the Only Way to Draw Against Red Is in the Dark from Behind a Tree

paper owner, Sam Suack, brother of Jim —whose appearance would never be the same afterwards—Alice Toynton, daughter of Bill Toynton, rancher, and a gambler, Matt Boland, whom he distrusts most of all.

It seemed to Red that he made enemies far too speedily, for he got many warnings to ride on. But he accepted a job with the Toyntons, offered by Alice, and found his first duty was to ride home with her to break the news that her brother Will had been shot in La Rez. He was interested in the Toyntons, but sensed the whole family walked in fear of the Suacks—and also learned to his amazement that Alice was going to marry Colonel Dick, although, still more amazingly, she seemed to be in love with Boland, the gambler. But his job there was not confirmed, so Red rode on to join the Hendersons, small ranch owners, who had defied the Suacks. Soon afterwards the Hendersons are murdered and Red, in a flaming fury, hastened to rouse the county to track the murderers. Again the trail lead to the Suacks, and Red rode on, accompanied only by Dugan, foreman of the Toynton spread.

Chapter X

GLAINE AND CURLEY

SUACK'S ranchhouse was a long swayback building, badly built years before by a rancher that had got out of the country. It had been added to, repaired roughly, propped up by Jim Suack who took no pride at all in the look of his place.

Men came and went, camped out in the hills until needed, or strayed afar, held up a stage or a bank, rustled a little on their own hook, blew the money and came back to be near the Border, and ready for any work that the Suacks offered.

Peace officers did not come nosing down into that rough country very often, because it happened that they had a way of falling out of their saddles for no reason that anybody could speak of.

Jim Suack had worked up a pretty good business in "buying" longhorns in Mexico and pushing them north to cowmen; some of whom weren't perhaps dishonest in snapping up a chance to have bigger herds at about $4 a cow. Running cows from the north and across into Mexico was more dangerous, took caution and skill, but was worth the trouble. The big Mexican ranchers had lots of money, some owned silver mines; and they had lots of range, liked Yankee beef—on the hoof.

Suack had snapped up many brands, invented some. Anybody who gave the matter some study would have found, for instance, that it didn't take much skill to make an X Cross out of the Greenhorn's V Bar, or a Wagonwheel out of the Dot Circle; an 8 B out of Durham's J D.

Dugan thought that if he and Red rode hard they would get into Suack's about daybreak, or breakfast time. "But maybe those fellows'll be lightin' out, first thing, for the Border. So we'll ride like hell, go clear around and cut in south and come up back along the road from the Border. Have a chance to meet 'em. One thing is sure. They'll not ride out of Suack's any way but south. 'An' if they don't ride, they'll be there when we come at sun-up or noon!"

Sun-up found them on sweating horses, but headed north between the Border and Suack's ranch.

"Now," Dugan explained, "if they start coming our way and see us ahead they won't think we are somebody they don't want to meet."

"Pat, I can't help havin' a deep feelin' down in my bones that we orta took Sam out there at Dale's an' hung him ourselves."

"Matt Boland is not a bad fellow, Red. The Toyntons like him a lot."

"This is a time when I'd rather be wrong 'n right!"

"Somebody is just topping the ridge. Two of 'em! Maybe that's them. We'll keep jogging easy."

After a time Red said, "No luck. Just a couple of Mexicans."

The riders came together. The Mexicans were young fellows, not handsome, wore comical sombreros, short-tailed jackets, and one had a fancy stamped saddle.

They reined up, exchanged pleasant enough greetings, with dark glances roving to find something that would tell more about these dust-covered travellers on tired horses.

Red's Spanish rippled and the dark faces brightened, answering. Yes, Suack's ranch was about three miles ahead. Yes; there were many men there. Yes, Senor Jim was hospitable toward men who came up from Mexico. No, Senor Jim was not there, but the Senora was there.

"God go with you!" said the Mexican on the stamped saddle, graciously.

Both raised their hats, bowed in passing.

HALF a dozen men loafed in front of the small store the Suacks let a wooden legged old scoundrel keep under some cottonwoods, hand-planted years before, between the house and the corral. Peg Leg had tobacco, hard candy, cheap pipes, cards, jimcrack knicknacks.

The half-breed Crow, the deep-voiced Paine, the sly nervous stranger Harve, had got in about three o'clock. They had gone up to the house and called for Jim. His new wife, though not a timid woman, from behind a barred door had told them Jim was not at home. He had gone, she said, to La Rez.

Crow and Paine and Harve had huddled together down by the corral, passed the bottle, had little to say, did not feel sleepy.

They had eaten breakfast with the bunch, saddled up, loafed about, waiting.

The tall dark Glaine and the young good looking boy known as Curly, leaned against the hitch-rack before Peg Leg's little store, whittled some, threw in a little chaff now and then as the big girthed Tex told humorously of playing tag with certain sheriffs over in the state he was named after. Peg Leg had rested on his elbows at the counter, smoked.

Crow and Paine and Harve lounged against the cottonwood, mumbled together with irritable rise of tone now and then.

Tex threw in an aside to the tall dark Glaine, "They ac' like they'd all swallered something as don't set easy on their stomicks." That reminded the merry Tex of the time somebody or other at some place or another, when drunk, had choked himself to death on catfish bones. "—an' us goodhearted fellers as helped bury 'im found over two hundred dollars in his jeans!" Tex thought that was a good joke.

The lean lipped Glaine smiled a little, not much.

Another man or two came sauntering up. One picked his teeth with a goose quill that he kept by him in a vest pocket. The other had a slabsided face, and talked from one side of his mouth. There was a bullet's puckered scar on the other cheek. He inquired generally, "Wonder when Jim's comin' back? An' whar's Sam?"

"Thar's somebody comin' over down yonder." Tex pointed, pushed up his hat, shaded his eyes with a palm. "Don' 'pear to be greasers."

Crow and Paine and Harve got together, clumped to the hitch-rack, looked.

"From the Border," said the deep-voiced Paine, then turned squarely about, looked off northward.

"Get out that thingumajig an' le's have a look," the half-breed Crow suggested.

Paine stirred toward his saddle, but Harve half-whispered, "You damn fool, you!"

"What'd we care?" Paine growled. "They're comin' from the south, ain't they? Nobody's heard yet. An' we oughta try it out. See whether to sell it to Jim or to take it along for ourselves."

The other men loafing there watched, interested, as Paine drew from a saddle scabbard where there was no rifle, a telescope, pulled it to more than the length of a man's arm, lifted it, squinted, saw nothing, cussed a little. "Somepun wrong with the thing. Don't work."

"Let me try." Crow took it.

The scope was high-powered, therefore sensitive of focus; and in focus the magnification was too great for it to be held steady enough for clear vision without a rest.

"You must've busted it, somehow."—"Never done a thing."—"Don't work now."—"Let me try 'er."

Tex had a try, and the man with the goose quill tried, and the slab-faced man took a squint, then gave it over to the outstretched hand of the silent Glaine.

Glaine squatted down, rested the glass on the hitch rack, fiddled a little, squinted a long time, and pushed the tube in before he got up, gave it back to Paine.

"Busted, you think?"

"May be," said Glaine. He surreptitiously gave a pluck of forefinger and thumb at the sleeve of the boy Curly. They walked off toward the stable sheds; and out of hearing, Glaine spoke quietly, scarcely moving his lips:

"We'll just stick ourselves out of sight. If one of them riding in isn't Red Clark, I'd better get specs. He was off up over to Hendersons, and here he comes ridin' north—straight for where he knows he is not liked. The other fellow is another just about like 'im, or he wouldn't be along. I've got a feeling that Crow and Paine and that Harve have been off up toward Hendersons. They are mighty close-mouthed about where they were, so

maybe things didn't come out the ways they wanted—which is sure so, if one of them boys is Red! The Suacks surely do want his scalp. I think I'll start oilin' my rifle a little. You'd better make sure there is no rust liable to come on yours, too. Then I think we'll maybe head toward La Rez and see if any word has come yet from your dad."

SO RED and Pat Dugan rode into Suacks.

No man there knew Red by sight, and he wasn't readily recognized from any description because even the stitching on his boots was dust covered.

As they came up at a walk, Dugan murmuringly told which was the half-breed Crow and Paine. They readily guessed at the stranger Harve.

Crow and Paine and Peg Leg knew Pat Dugan, and wondered what he could be doing coming along from the Border. But since the Suacks and Toyntons did not have any trouble between them, Dugan was greeted with, "Well, 'f 'tain't Pat!"—"'Lo Pat!"—"What you adoin' comin' from down yonder? Been on the dodge, heh?"

Red's horse, at the walk, came up a half neck in the lead; came on, right up so close that only a kind of sullenness in not moving kept Harve from stepping back out of the way as Paine and Crow did.

Red threw away the reins as he came out of the saddle. He hit the ground saying, "You three skunks that rode down on Hendersons yesterday maybe wanted to meet me, too, so I've come!"

That was that, and told everything needful. Smoke rolled thick to the crack of guns.

Red shot over the holster with the gun's muzzle not more than half way past his skinny belly—the most hazardous of all ways to shoot a gun fast, for a little twitch of a nervous wrist would put a muzzle-blast and slug through a fellow's own hide. As it was, the two hundred and fifty grain lead bullet smacked into the cat-quick Harve's stomach just as his hammer fell and his bullet went right over the top of Red's hat.

Harve pitched forward with his head thrown back as if on a broken neck, sagged sidewise and did not reach the ground before the deep-voiced Paine, with curses in his throat, a gun in one hand and a hand tugging at another gun, knocked up dust behind Red's heels as he went down, smashed through the breast by Red's second shot.

The half-breed Crow, twice hit by Dugan, was shooting back, wildly fast. Red simply twisted his body, not moving wrist or gun, brought the muzzle into line by an upward tilt from a back bend of body. Dugan's gun and Red's made one sound. Crow, crouching on a wounded leg, went backward as if his heels were jerked from under him.

Guns had come out so fast, shot so quick, that the other men were caught slack-jawed in pop-eyed surprise. They didn't even know just what the fight was about; but Paine and Crow were friends, the stranger Harve one of the bunch.

Dugan and Red, in going up almost point-blank to Paine and Crow and Harve, had put their backs to Tex and the fellow with the goose quill in his mouth, and to the slab-faced pucker-cheeked man.

The sow-bellied Tex squawked, "What in hell!" and backed up a couple of staggering steps as his arm crooked gunward, came out with a full arm flourish, and went right on up skyward in a blind shot. Dugan and Red had not come in to get just three men; they had come to get all the Suacks in sight. Red's gun was out a little farther in front of him with forearm pressed to the hip as he pivoted on the sharp dime-pointed heel, spun about, let Tex have it where the mark was biggest—squarely in the belly.

The pucker-cheeked man, smarter or more cowardly, made a jump over behind Harve's saddled horse as he reached for

his gun's butt; but the fellow who had dropped his goose-quill didn't have that much forethought. He was mad and scared both, and he let go a couple of times in a way that was rapid, but he had his sights filed off and his luck wasn't good. Dugan leaded him up about the same instant that the fat Tex flopped his face into the dirt.

Dugan yapped, "Look out!" snapped his gun toward the head of the pucker-cheeked man who was putting his gun across the seat of Harve's saddle; but Dugan's gun was empty.

Red's gun was empty, too, only he knew it, had kept count — which was another part of the old sheriff's training. Red's left hand was pulling his second gun as he pinwheeled on a boot heel, faced the horse broadside. Pucker-cheek had been in gunfights before, knew what counted wasn't shooting first so much as being sure to hit first. If the Devil had been around handy to take a bet he would have bet his own soul that Red was a dead man. Red felt that way, too, and put a little extra quickness into the left-handed snap shot; but a man's head at ten long-legged paces isn't much to snap at from the hip. The bullet went low, smacked into the horse.

The horse jumped and the pucker-cheeked man's gun fell out of his hand; and when the plunging horse passed, the pucker-cheeked man was falling over backwards with arms flung out in a loose upward toss.

There was nobody else around except Peg Leg standing up on his good leg so high that his wooden stump was dangling three inches off the ground, and his arms were as rigidly high up as if he were hanging by his wrists.

"Don't shoot, boys! Don't shoot!"

Dugan, not pausing to reload his revolver, had jumped to his saddle, whipped out his rifle. He was bleeding a little from the left forearm but that was nothing to think about. He watchfully turned this way and that, ready to kick the gun butt up against his shoulder and let anybody that showed symptoms of not liking what had been done have some special attention.

Up at the house two women stood before the doorway where they had run out and stopped short. A Chinese cook and Mexican helper showed up around a corner; but the chink was a smart man and he went back with baggy trousers flapping and dangling pigtail flying out behind him.

Dugan said, "I reckon that's about all! You hurt, Red?"

Red had a funny look and, with a kind of caution as if wary, was stepping toward the out-sprawled body of the pucker-cheeked man. "Missed 'im, Pat; but somehow he died!"

DUGAN came over and they both bent down. The man lay on his back and the front of his shirt was red colored right up heart-high.

"God A'mighty, Pat, my shot was belly-low!" Red drew a breath. "'Sides, I hit that horse. Damn it, I know where my shots go, allus!"

He pointed across to where the horse had staggered and fallen; then Red bent down, heaved the pucker-cheeked man over, ripped the back of his shirt, found the little half dime-sized purplish bruise with broken red edges in the center where a rifle bullet had struck.

Red looked at Dugan, Dugan looked at Red, and both looked down toward the stable where a man hallooed. He was hold-

ing a rifle in the bend of his left elbow, fingers at the butt, and his right hand was high up, palm out. Close by and a step or two back was another man, not so tall, with one hand up just like his companion.

The women up at the house were calling and squawking to know what had happened, and who were the two strangers that had come walking their horses and wiped out a half dozen of Suack's best fighting men.

Peg Leg asked if he could go talk to the women and nobody paid any attention, so he took a limping step; nothing happened, then he took a couple more, cautiously. Nobody said anything to him, and Peg Leg pulled his hands down and ran with a stumping lurch.

Red was not in much of a friendly mood as he recognized the tall dark Glaine, the young Curly, not now smiling, who had sidled off so readily in the fight at Dale's Place. He looked Glaine over under a tight frown, much puzzled. This lanky straight-backed dark Glaine had the earmarks of a range-bred fighting man, yet he had submissively backed out of two fights, was again hands-up.

Red spoke, "How you figger, feller? Ain't these yore friends?"

Glaine took his time, eyed Dugan, eyed Red. "Would men like these be yours?"

"If I rode with 'em and et their grub, yes! Maybe I gotta say 'Thanks' for you chippin' in. I didn't hear the rifle crack, so was puzzled some. But me, I like even them that help to get out in the open doin' it!"

Curly bit his lips a little, and not to hide a smile, looked with nervous side glance at Glaine's dark wrinkled steady face.

Glaine said, "Red, I've made me some mistakes in my life, most likely. Maybe me and Curly here have had to look for a resting place where there wasn't much chance to pick and choose who et with you. I knew you were coming—" He pointed toward the telescope over on the open counter of Peg Leg's little store place. "I didn't know why you were coming; but I knew if you came I wasn't going to raise a hand against you!"

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I used to know a man named William Tyler Clark, Sheriff of Tulluco."

"Yeah?" Red didn't run around falling on the necks of people who said they had known his dad.

"For another," Glaine continued, easy-voiced, "did you by happenchance get a letter that had been dropped behind old Jack's bar up there at Juilos?"

Red cut loose. "An' you played hell, feller! I reckon maybe your intentions was good. I might have me some doubts, but I ain't suspicious now that you knocked over this feller here. It was that letter sayin' to look out for what was comin' at sundown that made us up there a little careless daytime, and——"

Red told it all, what he had found when returning from the hunt, what had happened, how they had run onto Sam at Dale's Place. He swung a hand at Dugan. "So me and him come—come right up so close we could muzzle-blast an' powder-burn 'em as they died!"

"I reckon," Glaine said, looking about, "Jim Suack'll know you paid him a visit! Where were you thinking of riding now?"

"Where we're most liable to find Jim Suack! You tell me where?"

"Jim somehow didn't take much of a shine to Curly and me. We felt bad, of course, that he ain't told us all his secrets. Don't know where he went, though I heard to La Rez. I hear tell he suspects the Governor has sent a man down here to nose around. Maybe he suspects you, uh?"

"Me? I'm just a puncher. I fight for any outfit I work for. I was workin' for the Hendersons!"

Glaine walked over and looked down at Harve; asked, "Know this one?"

"No. You?"

"He answered to a description. If he's the same man, there's quite a little chunk

of a reward on his head. He rode in here a couple of days ago with a letter from somebody."

"From who? Joe Dick?"

Glaine shook his head. "I don't know. But he had him a letter. Jim read it and shook hands. Are you sure, Red, that you and your friend here don't want some company when you ride off?"

"Plumb sure!"

"All right. 'Bye, boys. And luck! Our horses are saddled down here in the stable."

Glaine and Curley turned their backs, walked off, not hurrying.

Red frowned, watching. "Pat, he's got me up a stump. I purt-near don't like him a lot. Yet let me look 'em over when I'm hirin' men, and I'd purt-near take him quick. He must be all right, in a way. From the stable down there he could have picked you an' me off easy as apples, chin-high."

Chapter XI

Judge Jackson

AMA TOTTILL-MENDEZ-SUACK, from behind the barred door, looked through the broken glass of a window and talked to Red and Pat Dugan who were on horseback.

Red had said as they rode up, "Don't let 'er know what we are after, or we won't get a chance to see if they is a box under Jim's bed. Just you coax that door open an' let me inside. Best way to make a woman do whatever you want is to make her think you don't want to!"

Ama was in a way a famous girl. Her father had been a no'count, easy going, hard-to-dislike sort of broken down gentleman. He married the daughter of a well-to-do Mexican merchant and drank himself to death.

Ama was born flirting, winked at the doctor before she was diapered, turned out not much good but kept on being pretty. It was like her now not to show her face at the window until she had fixed her hair with curlecue curls on the tawny cheeks, stuck in the high silver-studded tortoise shell comb, swung a shawl's fringe about her throat. She was a little thing, cute, pretty, and deceitful.

She had seen men die in street brawls and personal fights. That was part of the life of the country into which she had been born. She had stirred up jealous quarrels for little more than the excitement, wept sometimes, and sometimes shrugged her shoulders when somebody died because of her. The shooting had terrified her, and she thought Red and Dugan must be worse men than those whom they shot down. She hated all the men about the place, possibly excepting the young smiling Curly, and she especially hated Jim Suack—which was one reason, in a way, why she had married him; though Jim had given her a weighty pouch with which to buy finery in the Mexican town across the Border. As soon as she recognized Pat Dugan she felt better. She knew Pat and liked him.

Ama's dark eyes widened, hardened, as she heard the story of the Hendersons. She knew Hattie Henderson a little and, unconsciously bilingual, as she listened she called on saints in Spanish, rippled English curses with gasped breath.

Old Peg Leg leaned up against the house, listening too; and his indignation was tremendous. He blurted everything he could think of to make these two boys, who could surely out-shoot anybody he had ever seen, believe that he approved of what they had done. His insincerity caused him to bawl out:

"Why Jim he would shorely have shot 'em hisself when he found out how they——"

Ama's rapid fierce tongue screamed, "You dirty old liar— Jim sent them! He promised a thousand dollars. He's worse than any of them. Would have done all they did and more. I wish he had been here and been killed too!"

She poked her hand through the broken

window toward where the Chinese cook and Mexican boy, under Dugan's orders, were carrying, half dragging, the bodies over in the shade, putting them in a row.

The sullen-looking Indian woman in the room behind Ama began to talk.

Red cocked an ear. She was talking Spanish. He looked at Peg Leg. She was talking about Peg Leg and telling Ama that she was a fool to have said what she did when the peg-legged one could hear and would surely tell Jim Suack and Jim Suack would kill her.

Peg Leg understood Spanish, too; not as well as Red, and he did not know how well Red was overhearing what the women talked about.

Peg Leg said, "I'll just go along down thar an' he'p?" He ended the remark with a question, asking permission. Nobody said he could go or that he couldn't go, so he edged off with a swaying limp, backward look, then broke into a hobbling run.

Red was trying to listen and think of things. The thinking was in a hazy tangle; but the tangle was all around the clear enough notion that this woman, who was in a way pretty, surely must know a lot about lots of things, and if she could be badly scared would talk. He knew very well that he couldn't scare a woman, any kind of a woman, by making threats and scowling. He had tried it here and there from time to time and it didn't work. Women seemed to know that he just wouldn't hurt them, no matter how much they needed being hurt.

Dugan saw what Peg Leg was up to and started to take after him; but Red reined in closer, spoke low. "Let 'im go, Pat!" and winked hard with jerk of his head toward the window. He, himself, couldn't scare the women but he could let Peg Leg do it for him.

When Ama stopped quarreling with the servant and looked through the window she saw Peg Leg pulling a saddle horse to the hitch-rack and begin to climb from the rack into the saddle. She let out a scared squawk:

"Stop him! Kill him! He'll tell Jim! Shoot him!"

Ama began to swear in Spanish and English both, and the Indian woman droned, *"Quién se lo dijo á——"* and that made Ama mad, too.

Peg Leg could hear the squawking and he kept a frightened face over his shoulder as he rode off, hanging to the horn with both hands and bouncing up and down in the saddle with his wooden leg sticking away out from the horse's side and the stirrup flapping.

AMA felt that she could not talk well through the window. She always had her best success with men when she stood close to them. She threw off the bar of the door and swung it open, ran out with hands up, pleading. She was very mad and very frightened. Also she forgot that she was barefooted and had on a dirty old skirt. There was much of the slut in her. She liked finery but was lazy. It was easier to put powder on her face, perfume on her breast, than to take a bath.

She did her talking to Dugan, whom she knew, and patted his leg as she coaxed, beat the leg with a fist when the coaxing did not seem to do any good. Her moods were fluttery and intense; and she had been spoiled by learning before she toddled well that if she had tantrums and yelled and lied, and smiled and teased and lied, and kissed and cussed and lied, begged, wept, and kept on, twisting her tongue this way and that, sooner or later she could get just about what she wanted out of any man. Her skill that way had improved as she grew older; also her folly in reckless lying and deceit.

She didn't get Dugan to take out after Peg Leg and shoot him; so she began to beg him to tell her what would become of her now.

Peg Leg, she said, would tell Jim and

Jim would kill her. Dugan didn't say, "Serve you right!" He thought that maybe he ought to think it because he knew of her doings and her reputation; but she was young, and pretty even in bare feet and dirty old skirt; and he knew that Jim was likely to kill her.

Just as soon as he had heard the door-bar being taken down, Red got out of the saddle. As Ama came flying out, he went clattering in. The Indian woman sullenly got before him, asked gutterly sullen, "What do you want?"

"To give you a little present!" Red rammed a hand into a pocket, the hand came up with two silver dollars. "Just you an' me be friends for about a minute! Here!"

Her palm, with sullen composure, met his extended hand; then Red dropped to his knees, looked under the bed, flattened out, began to crawl. It was a dirt floor, dusty, thick with lint, cluttered with odds and ends of trifles from saddle bags to old clothes and empty bottles that had been kicked under the bed to be out of the way. Soon he crawled out backwards with much the squirming of a dog that backs from a deep gopher hole—with the gopher in his mouth.

The Indian woman stooped ready to snatch and fight if he had laid hold of some treasure that she didn't know about. He rose to his knees, opened the cigar box, let her finger and poke about in the letters. She was looking for money or jewels, asked, "Why you want these?"

"Oh paper is allus good to start a fire with when you're campin' out. I'm goin' to start me a fire that'll burn this whole damn country!"

The very first letter he looked at, the last one Jim had received, made Red rejoice. He read with difficulty and much muttering, and didn't know the meaning of at least one word:

Dear Jim:

I have just been favored with confidential information from an indubitable source that the Governor is sending a man secretly down here to worm his way into the confidence of you boys and I hasten to give warning to keep your eye peeled. Burn this as always.

Sincerely,

Dick.

HE WENT to his horse, stuffed letters down into the saddle bag.

Ama saw that he was stealing something and came at him. "What are you doing? What have you got?"

"Some letters somebody not as purty as you wrote Jim!" He was feeling elated and grinned.

His casual use of the word "pretty" encouraged her. She suspiciously made sure that they were merely letters, drew one from a discolored envelope, read enough not to be interested; then demanded, "Will you help me? Jim will kill me! Take me away! I haven't a friend in the world!"

Red buckled the saddle bag, slapped it. "Take you where?"

"I don't know! Somewhere where he can't find me! He'll kill me. He will!"

"I do kinda suspect that if he don't he'll make you wish he had."

Ama put a hand on Red's arm and squeezed a little, looked sweet and sad, and somehow made Red feel that she thought he was a fine handsome boy. If he had made a bet right then and there, he would have had sense enough to bet that it was all put-on and flubdub; and that she wasn't much good; but if all boys, and even grayed men, turned and ran from the women they knew weren't much good, most of the pretty, evil blandishing girls

of the world would either starve or have to take in washing.

Also he thought that if he could get her off where she would talk freely he might learn some things; whether, for instance, young Will Toynton had been paying her too much attention; tell why she had so soon married Jim Suack and hated him?

"Pat," he said, "it's purt-near murder to let Jim Suack get his hands on her."

Dugan, not so young as Red, was young too; her strong perfume was still in his nose. He had always thought she was pretty. "I know it. But where are we going?"

"To Juilos and raise some more hell!" Red slapped the saddle bag.

"Then she can come along if she wants?"

"Do you wanta come?" Red asked.

Ama lifted her dark face with a listening look, considering. Thoughts fluttered about in her head, cast hazy shadows in the jewel glaze of her eyes. She asked, "If Jim tried to hurt me, will you kill him?"

"He don't have to do that to get killed!"

"If I get to Matt Boland, he will help me!"

"That gambler?"

Ama nodded wih a perky look as if hopeful that Red might be a little jealous. "Ah," she said, "he is a fine man; don't you think?"

"I'll tell you better after we get back to Dale's Place!"

THEY had to wait until Ama dressed, then they started off for Dale's Place. She was on a side saddle because she did not think it lady-like to ride astride. She brought along a big brown valise with enough finery in it to have decked out a princess for a dance; and since she could not carry it, Dugan and Red took turns.

They were tired, their horses were tired. Ama chattered like a magpie until Red asked, "You an' Will Toynton was friends, some; wasn't you?"

"Some," she said, touching a curl on the side of her cheek with a gloved finger and looking at distant scenery.

"You feel awful bad when he died thataway?"

"Oh sure. Terrible."

"How it come your husband killed him?"

"I don't know anything about it!"

She rode up close to the side of Dugan and began to talk to him.

Red was carrying the valise, awkwardly. He couldn't set it on the horse's neck, and the weight pulled his arm. He was tempted to drop it, suddenly didn't like her at all; didn't think she was really pretty.

They rode up to Dale's Place. Potts bawled for Dale and Dale came trotting with head thrown forward as if he had to take quick steps to keep from falling forward. His eyes popped at Ama being with Red and Dugan. He pulled his hat, scraped and bowed, called her "Miz Suack," talked fast and welcomingly, but shifted his eyes about as if looking for a good hole to have handy to crawl into in case Jim Suack rode in. A hole would then be the most comfortable place for an innocent bystander.

Right off Red was put into a bad humor by hearing that Matt Boland and Sam Suack had stayed in the room the rest of the night, had breakfasted together, and Sam started off toward Juilos, Boland toward the Toynton ranch.

Dugan looked at Red. Their stares met. Neither said a word. Red nodded; Dugan nodded.

Red sat and smoked some cigarettes, then he went to Dugan. "All my fault. You wanted to do what orta been done. Soon as my horse is rested, I'm goin' to town. Though I don't aim to get in before night. How about you goin' back to the ranch; and if you catch that gambler, kill him!"

Potts had taken the horses to the stable to water and feed them. Red, cranky

about horse care, soon followed; and sure enough Potts had tied Daisy to the manger without taking off the saddle, not even loosening the cinch.

Potts was used to being talked to rough, but he got a cussing that left him gawky and a-blink with mouth open in a kind of admiration.

Red wound up with, "The only reason you didn't die as a baby was 'cause God A'mighty was too busy to foresee what you'd grow into! You ever tie a horse of mine without uncinchin' an' I'll fix up that oversight of his'n with a club!"

Red went back up to the house, found Dugan squatted before the front door.

"Red, Mr. Toynton ain't passed, goin' home. I'll go to the ranch an' even if that gambler ain't there, I'd better stay till they get a new foreman. Sorta help."

"'F he fires you, he won't be much of a man."

"Bill has changed a lot the last couple of years."

"Don't let that gambler talk you outa killin' him!"

"I won't." Dugan was dead tired and it showed in his eyes. "Red, I'm sure glad I met you. You are a powerful lot like Bud."

"If they was more women in this country like Hattie, they'd be better men! Take Alice Toynton. She's purty; but she likes that gambler!"

"I know."

"An' you Toyntons, you nursed that Mendez when you all knew he was a Mexican rustler; didn't you?"

Dugan nodded.

"I ain't goin' to say it served Bill Toynton right for to have him shoot his boy; but I am goin' to say that if you don't let snakes crawl around in your house, like you liked 'em, nobody in the fam'ly is liable to get bit."

Dugan drew a deep breath. "Yes, Bud he talked point-blank thataway to Bill Toynton about nursin' Mendez; and it hurt Bill's feelin's."

Red snorted contemptuously. "All them Toyntons has got a weak spot down inside of 'em."

WHILE they were talking the stage from the hills came along with jingle of harness, grind of wheels, smoke-like drift of dust. Potts yelled and yelled for Dale, and Dale did not come. Potts went looking for him, found him holding on to the back of a chair with his face about a foot from Ama's. He was smacking a dry mouth and making vague sounds of amazement.

He was hearing about the gunfight at Suack's; had never heard anything like it before.

A couple of miners, a hill town merchant, a mining camp saloon keeper, and the driver got out of the stage, went to the bar.

Dale was just bursting with news. The men edged to the door to take a look at Red and Dugan, then they went respectfully to talk to Ama. She liked having them come. The saloon man, named Lims was the most at ease with her. He had a big piece of glass in his necktie that he called a diamond. He might have bought it for a diamond. It glittered without having quicksilver on the back, and it would scratch a mirror. He was shaven, combined his black hair with vaseline, and that made him look like a gentleman. He suggested that she go on into town in the stage; more comfortable traveling.

Red and Dugan walked down to the stable, kept out of sight, watched the stage move off with fresh horses at a trot.

Dugan made ready to go to the Toynton ranch. Red told him, "Take that gambler's ears off him for watch charms. And remember, whatever he says as sounds right is liable to be a lie!"

Red bought some cheese, crackers, dried beef, a tin of oysters, can of tomatoes, saddled up, rode toward Juilos.

After a few miles he left the road, climbed toward a far clump of trees, rode

in behind them, picketed the horse, ate cheese, dried beef, crackers, drank tomato juice, oyster juice, and wished for coffee. He put the saddle in the shade, used it for a pillow, took off his boots, smoked a cigarette, slept, and awakened when the sun was far down in the west.

NIGHT came on and Red rode along, not hurrying.

His instincts were primitive enough for him to believe, or at least feel, that Bud and Hattie Henderson knew about the vengeance that had been taken; savagely primitive enough to feel that they rejoiced over there where lots of big fat cows roamed in knee-deep grass for any man to throw his rope on; put his brand on; and horses that never tired, cooks that never got drunk between paydays. His ideas of Heaven were too hazy for him to talk about to other people; but if it was a place where cowboys and their women wanted to be, then most surely it was good cow country.

It was along within an hour of midnight when he got to town, and being so late he didn't stop at the corral but 'loped on up town first to see if he could catch Mr. Jackson in the Eldorado, ask some questions, maybe learn a little something.

Lights were burning. The broken window had been boarded up. Before Red was out of the saddle he thought it looked like pretty good business for a dead town, late at night. The door was shut. He went in, pushed it to, said "Howdy" with the air of a man coming among friends.

Mr. Jackson was behind the bar, Charley, the barkeep, not working tonight, was on the other side with Pete Jones, the blacksmith, little Hopner of the New York Store in his big white hat that was pushed so far back on his head it seemed about to fall off. Red was most surprised to see that tall dark man Glaine whom he was always bumping into, and young Curly. Sue Max was there, and fat Dolly Varden, the tall blonde young Rose, all looking their best but not acting it. They seemed cold and tired as if being gay was too much hard work.

The mining camp saloon keeper, Lims, was there. He had talked much, spent money. He had his hat off as if wanting them to see how his hair looked, slick and black. Now and then he wiggled the diamond-like piece of glass with thumb and forefinger.

Up against the bar, as if it were going to be his sleeping place, was Zee Hill, editor, journeyman printer, frowsy, lazy, wearing the clothes of a bum, having the face of a gentleman, amused eyes.

Red said "Howdy," and the tall blonde Rose squealed. All had turned to look at him but no one spoke readily. Then the tall dark Glaine, with Curly tagging along, took his glass of whiskey to the nearest table, sat down, as if again getting out of the way. Zee Hill looked about at the faces with mild amusement. He flapped a pocket lightly, shook up the tobacco crumbs, straightened out a crumpled paper, twisted a cigarette with long inky fingers. "Pardon," he said and took the glowing cigar butt from Charley's mouth, got a light, put the cigar butt back without Charley seeming to know what had happened. The mining camp saloon keeper put on his hat as if he were thinking of leaving.

Red settled back on his heels, mystified. "You all look like a poison pup had bit you!" He was just as ready as anybody to be unfriendly.

Old Jackson rumbled slowly, "Howdy," paused, added, "son."

Sue Max, with spangles and dodads aglitter and rustling, moved up slowly and stared with black frozen-like eyes. Sue didn't look very young at all now. "Red, why—*why* did you ride in here?" She took hold of him as if she liked holding him, then gave a shove, pressed hard. "Go, Red! Get out! Quick! My God, go! Folks are saying terrible things!"

Red twisted away, pushed off her hands,

stepped by her. "Maybe, when I feel like it! Somebody start tellin' me why maybe I oughta feel like it!" He searched their faces with vague accusation; his glare settled on Glaine. "He been tellin' things about me?" Red's out-thrust arm made the accusation personal.

Heads swung on twisted necks, eyeing Glaine whose dark wrinkled face did not bat an eye. Curly seemed nervous enough, but Curly was just a kid. Only Mr. Jackson who couldn't twist his short neck, and seemed too bulky and hard-set to move his big body, did not look around.

Sue Max said, "No Red, *he* ain't!"

Lazy-mannered Zee Hill blew smoke out nose and opened mouth, spoke quietly. "Now that I'm reviewing and recollecting, Red, I'll say that he's about the only one here tonight as hasn't opened his mouth, except to let a little whiskey trickle down."

RED'S spurs jangled as he walked up close to Hill, and Sue Max came right along beside him. "Then you tell me why ever'body's gone crazy-like!"

Little Hopner of the New York Store eased his glass onto the bar, sidled off. The blacksmith saw what Hopner was doing, and followed. "Guess we'll be toddlin'," said Blacky, sort of low and hurried as if he didn't want to be heard. Lims, pulled down his hat, looked at his watch, exclaimed: "Late. Well, I'll be goin'. Night, ever'body!"

They were near the door when there was a snap-click, and Old Jack's deep voice came from about a foot lower in his belly than usual. "You boys are in too much rush!"

They looked over their shoulders and their eyes bugged out. They got their backs to the door in a quick submissive jump, so quick that Hopner's big white hat fell off. Old Jack had broken open his double-barreled ten guage, was slipping in buckshot shells.

"Come back here," said Mr. Jackson.

The mining camp saloon keeper got his breath, raised his chin. "Why, you can't boss folks around like this!"

Mr. Jackson said, "All right. You just open that door after I've said not to!"

"Be murder!" said Lims.

"Be murder," Mr. Jackson agreed.

They came back from the door, full of wonder. Hopner was scared; the saloon keeper acted mad, but not mad enough to open his mouth. There was lots of silence from all parties.

Old Jack laid the shotgun in the crook of his left arm, took up his corncob, prodded with stubby forefinger, struck a match, puff-puffed, lifted his eyes in a roving glance to make sure that everybody was behaving nicely. He jerked his head a little.

"Charley, you'd better come over around back here and put on your apron. All my life I've seen things go wrong because when there was so much talk nobody took the trouble to get right down to the facts as was knowed by them who done the talkin'. This here is goin' to be differ'nt. We're goin' to hold a sorta little court, like. I'll see as how order is kep'." He stepped back, pushed his high stool up close to the bar, took his seat. "This ain't what you call accordin' to Hoyle with all the proper rigermarole; but no lawyers bein' present, I reckon it'll be done honest!"

"My holy gosh, Mr. Jackson," Red blurted, "what's come over—?"

"Shut up, son. You'll have all the chanct you want to talk. Where's your horse?"

"Out front there."

Mr. Jackson puffed, meditated a little. "Sue, you and the girls go fetch blankets. Roust Whitey out, tell him to bring a hammer an' couple hands full of nails."

"But Jack—" Sue, being a woman, wanted to argue.

"Go on, honey. Do like I say."

The girls started slowly, then broke into a run, anxious to hurry back lest they miss something.

Mr. Jackson looked the men over, his bright pea-sized eyes settled on Hill. "You."

"Right, Judge. I know a little shorthand, if that is what Your Honor has in mind!"

Old Jack reflected, gazed into the newspaper man's amused eyes, decided, "No. We all got good ears and mem'ries.

Here—" He reached behind him, took from the shelf a big padlock, skittered it along the bar. "You go out and lock up. Then you take Red's horse, the which some people know, and lead him around back out of sight, just in case cur'us people might want to know what's goin' on. Tie him right up close to the back porch there. Then you come in the back way, lock the door and bring me the key."

The lazy-mannered Hill made a little gesture. "As bailiff of this honorable court, I am swollen with pride to obey!" He took the padlock and went.

Red looked after him, turned on Mr. Jackson. "What the hell do you think you are doin', Jack?"

"Quiet, son. Keep your shirt tail tucked in. An' you, bein' sudden-like with your guns, would it take much coaxin' for to get you to lay 'em down up here by me?"

Red's answer was instantaneous and blasphemous.

Mr. Jackson clucked reproachfully. "Tut, tut, tut! Then maybe if I ask for you to do it for *me*, would you?"

Red fidgetted, started to say no, wouldn't say yes, looked about, demanded, "What the hell's this all about?"

"You'll learn. An' if your conscience is easy, you won't mind doin' as I ask."

"But how about him, and him, and him?" Red pointed at Glaine, at Curly, at the man Lims.

The saloon keeper said quickly, "I'm not armed!" and lifted his coat tail away up to his waist. Pete Jones said, "Gosh but you are an absent-minded feller!" and he flung open Lims' coat, disclosed a shoulder holster, which was so uncommon in the country as not to be looked for. Pete explained as he whipped out the gun, laid it on the bar, "I seen it a while ago when Rosy wouldn't kiss him."

Old Jack's bright eyes stayed quite a while on the uncomfortable saloon man's face; then the rumbling voice announced with no more feeling than a tally-keeper at a branding chute, "Lie Number One, an' no argyment about it."

Red unbuckled his guns, brought them over, put them at Mr. Jackson's elbow; again pointed toward Glaine. "What about him?"

"Him?" Old Jack studied Glaine for a time. "He ain't been party to no talk at all an' so ain't liable to get excited."

Mr. Jackson drew one gun from Red's holster, then the other, examined them carefully, returned each to its holster, and scratched his short-beard cheek. He announced clearly, placidly, "Just for the information of all present, I hereby state that the boy's guns ain't got a notch on 'em."

The mining camp saloon keeper gave his glass lump a waggle. "But that don't prove he did't—"

Old Jack rumbled, "You'll have your chanct to talk, Lims. All I'm sayin' is the boy ain't notched his guns—the which is some differ'nt from the way most men hereabouts do."

PETE JONES, always acting a little funny and making remarks, held up his hand like a little boy in school. "Can I talk to the barkeep here?"

"You can buy a drink once in a while," Mr. Jackson ruled, "but not many. This court is goin' to stay sober."

The girls came behind Whitey. Hill followed, tossed the key to Old Jack, saw the bar bottle was out and not being watched, poured himself a drink.

Whitey, Pete Jones and the blacksmith nailed up blankets before the front windows, drawing them tight to keep the light from being seen.

Sue Max went over and stood by Red. She didn't say anything but people watched her because she was after a chance to speak furtively to him. Old Jack gestured and Sue went to a chair, flounced down, rolled a cigarette, had Hill give her a match, then she pulled him into a chair by her. Sue crossed her legs, rested her elbow on a knee, chin on her palm.

The blankets were nailed up. People stood about expectantly. Mr. Jackson knocked out his corncob, spoke:

"Red, you been over at Bud Henderson's and—"

Red started to talk, fast, angrily, but Mr. Jackson rapped hard.

"Now you answer like I say. You tell us how you come to work for Bud, and what happened, clear up to now."

Red was mad. His eyes had challenge in them. He told how he had gone to Toynton's ranch "—the night Will was killed here." He said that Mr. Toynton wasn't hiring so, "Pat Dugan said to ride over an' see Bud Henderson. I did. 'Twas like I'd met my brother!"

"Now you tell, Red, how did you and Hattie and Bud get on?"

"Like kids at a picnic and—"

"Did you by happenchance like Hattie first rate?"

"You're damned right I liked her, and when—"

Mr. Jackson raised a stubby hand. "Now let's go slow. Then what?"

"Yesterday mornin' I went huntin'. Hit a buck, tracked him to hell an' gone. Got him an' come back. Then—there—well, I found—" Red told it fiercely.

The tall blonde Rose began to cry and Dolly Vaden's pinkish fat face grew white. Sue Max bit on her knuckles and wrinkles came on her tense face like new scratches.

Pete Jones rested on both elbows with his back against the bar. His hat was away back on his head, his eyes were fixed on the back of Hopner's neck. Now and then Pete took a look at the saloon man Lims.

The dark wrinkled Glaine had his fingers lightly about the whiskey glass, not yet emptied. He watched Red and listened carefully.

"—rode into Toynton's to tell him, but he was gone. I went down to Pat Dugan. I don't know this damn country. I wanted a guide. Pat he come along. Over at Dale's Place we found Sam Suack drunk. We jumped 'im, and he had a locket—Bud's picture in it. We oughta've killed 'im, but—"

Red's words stumbled here. He partly didn't like to say he had been such a fool as to trust the gambler; and partly he didn't want word to get out that he was going to make some trouble for that gambler.

Sue Max, listening, clenched her hands till the nails cut, she was that anxious for Red to have his story smooth.

Old Jack brushed his forehead with a palm, in an aside to Charley said, "Beer."

"—but," Red went on, "you can't just shoot a man. We left Sam in the keepin' of Matt Boland. Then me an' Pat lit out for the Suacks. Rode clear around and come up from the south so as to head off any break for the Border." Red's arm went straight as a rifle barrel at Glaine. "He was there at Suack's when we rode in. Him an' that kid can tell what happened!"

Pete Jones got his breath first. "This is too much for my weak heart! Give me another whiskey, Charley!"

Charley broke into a sweat. "An' all evenin' him, knowing more 'n anybody, ain't said a word!"

Everybody was astounded; even Mr. Jackson's pea-sized eyes got as big as hazelnuts.

GLAINE arose, dark, tall, weather-wrinkled, and at ease. "Me and Curly, this boy here, had been working a little for Suack and we was there. By happenchance, down to the stable when this boy and another man rode in. They come in at a walk. They come up close to where the bunch was. They hit the ground and called for a fight right up close to the fellows' faces. When the smoke cleared away there were six dead Suacks. Me and Curly here walked out, heard why 'twas done, and approved. We got our horses and rode, straggled 'cross country and got in here a little after dark."

Glaine lifted his glass of whiskey, drank, sat down.

Lims, the saloon man, shouted, "Then they didn't line 'em up an' shoot 'em down, helpless like—"

Glaine arose, took his time, said, "You heard me tell that I approved, didn't you!" and sat down.

Hopner was in a chair, holding on with both hands. He looked unhappy. Now and then he lifted his nervous eyes, found somebody watching him, and he scrouged lower.

Old Jack's knuckles pounded down the hubbub of chatter and lifted voices. Quiet came. "Now, Mr. Lims, just you do all the talkin' you like!"

Lims took off his hat and rubbed his head, mussed his hair a little. He was nervous. He grinned at everybody but the grin wouldn't stay on his face; kept vanishing and an anxious look showed. Then he would grin some more. "Well, of course, I—I don't really *know* anything, only—you have heard—hm—" he looked at Red—"this fellow—"

"His name," Old Jack announced, "it is Mr. Clark. He is from Tulluco. Comes of a good fam'ly, too."

Zee Hill poked Sue in the ribs, leaned close. "I fear His Honor is showing a judicial prejudice."

Sue said, "Shut up!" then because she liked Hill she put out her hand without looking for him to hold. He held it, rubbed it, patted it.

Mr. Lims wiggled his piece of glass. "There at Dale's Place, Mrs. Suack—hm—she said that the Dugan and this—this Mister Clark—anyhow, she wanted to get away from them and come in the stage. We sat together and—hm—you understand, gentlemen, I am only repeating what—yes, *she* said that Dugan and this Mister Clark got the drop and lined the fellows up at the ranch and—I don't know a thing more than—than she told me!"

"You been mighty noisy all evenin'," said Mr. Jackson, "sayin' it was so anyhow! You been sayin' anybody was a fool to think two men could ride in on six an' shoot it out face to face an' not get killed! You been sayin' you believed them men was caught off guard an' plain murdered."

Lims almost wailed, "Well why didn't he he—" an accusing hand pointed at Glaine "—speak up an' say he seen it!"

Old Jack said, "They ain't no law, as I know of, agin a man holdin' his tongue!"

"An'," said Lims, "it did sorta fit in with how he—" Lims was now accusing little Hopner "—talked!"

Hopner scrouged down in his chair, bent his head as if from a falling club. Somebody gave him a drink of whiskey, somebody else pulled him to his feet, and Old Jack rumbled, "Now, Hop, you just repeat again what all hearsay you've heard!"

Hopner began in a low frightened voice. He said that Jim Suack, on his way back from La Rez, had been in his store when Sam came 'loping into town and, being told where Jim was, came to the New York Store.

"They was nobody there but me and Jim. Sam he come in all out of breath and looked sick. You all know how Jim is about his brother. Jim took hold of Sam and asked what was the matter and Sam begun to talk. Now, fellows, I d-don't know a thing only w-what—"

Old Jack rapped on the bar. "Don't go diversacoursin'!" Mr. Jackson looked a little pleased with himself for having used a big legal-sounding word. He took a sip of beer.

Hopner's unsteady weak-toned voice went on. "Sam he said him and the boys, Crow and Paine and that man Harve—he said they rode in on Henderson's—he said they wanted to talk with Bud—" Hopner grimaced as if a tooth hurt him. "I c-can't talk no more. I—I feel sick!"

MR. JACKSON cleared his throat, lay forward on the bar, demanded in a deep belly-rumble, "And how you reckon all us that liked this here boy have been feelin' all night with your talk, and his'n there?" His bright eyes shifted to Lims.

But Hopner said he couldn't talk any more and flopped down in the chair, doubled over and made sick sounds.

Red said, "What on earth is the matter with ever'body? What you talkin' about anyhow?"

Sue Max jumped up. She screamed, "I'll tell you, Red! Sam Suack said when they rode into Henderson's they found Bud dead, Hattie like you said, and you gone!"

Red stood there listening after Sue had said it and everybody was looking at him. He was not even mad; just dazed and hurt.

"Lims here," Mr. Jackson said, "he has been tellin' us all evenin' how that fitted in with you wipin' out the bunch over at Suacks. With them dead, you could accuse them."

Red did not seem to hear. His jaws locked tight and his limber-slim body tightened at the joints, rigidly. He stared at Mr. Jackson. "That's why you took my guns off me? So I'd have to be arrested on them Suacks' say-so!"

"Red, you ain't very smart. Here!" Old Jack gave the guns an impatient push. "I wanted all this talk threshed out by them as has been doin' the talkin'. I was afraid that, impulsive-like, you might shoot Lims and Hopner here. Not that anybody would much care! Them Suacks lit out for La Rez an' I hear tell they ca'culate to swear out some warrants and poster a reward. When Miz Suack come to town and heard talk about what Sam had said, she got back in the stage an' went on over to La Rez to find Jim."

"But what of Pat Dugan?"

"Lims and Hopner here they figger that you must've fooled Pat into thinkin' the Suacks done it, so that he chipped in an' helped you."

"What does Sam say then about me and Pat catchin' him?"

"We ain't heard that Sam said anything!" Mr. Jackson frowned at Hopner. Hopner would not look up. "So it 'pears, son, you are in a pickle. You ain't got no proofs right handy as to what did happen at Bud's place. You just got some friends. With the Suacks fixin' things up with the sheriff—well, here is your guns. Here is the key to the back door. The Border it is close by. Your horse is around back."

Zee Hill pinched Sue's cigarette out of her fingers, put it into his mouth, got up lazy-mannered, sagged on a hip, smiled a little. "Me, I think that is all wrong."

"We are listenin'. All us, Mr. Hill!" Old Jack did not look encouraging.

"If Red runs, people are pretty sure to say that he is guilty. And if he runs, he'll run where? No matter where he goes, or what name he takes, the story will follow. He can't ride far enough south of the Border not to have that story—"

Red was buckling on his guns. "Border? I'm not ridin' to any damn Border! I'm goin' to La Rez! An' if I catch them Suacks I'm goin' to bring 'em back. I'll bring Sam back on the end of my rope and he'll be talkin' loud, fast and truthful!"

Sue Max squealed ecstatically.

"My horse," Red said, "is purt-near dead on his legs, so I'd like to borrow—"

Pete Jones spoke up. "Kid, you go down to the stable and tell Slim to give you your pick."

Red said, "Thanks," vaguely. He snatched up the back door key and went at a running clatter of heels and spurs. He bumped against a table in the rear in the dark, found the door, fumbled for the lock, opened it, passed through, slammed it hard behind him.

Mr. Jackson took out his big watch, drew a deep breath. "Purt near three o'clock. But we'll all just stay here a little longer for to give that boy a chance to get going. Somebody might think of some business over at La Rez and send word."

Many eyes turned on the miserable Hopner, some on the inscrutable Glaine. He was a hard one to figure. It didn't seem humanly natural for a man to keep his mouth so tightly shut. They wanted to ask him why he had done it, but he did not appear to be the sort of man who would be polite if asked questions.

Chapter XII

RED WONDERS IF HE WAS OVER HASTY

RED started at a lope for the stable, remembered the letters.

He felt that they were worth more to him than treasure and it was a foolish thing to be carrying treasure around in a saddle bag.

He was just about under the cottonwood before the New York Store, jerked up the horse's head, then rode a few steps nearer the long hitch-rack, deeper in the shade of the bright starry night. He jumped off, pulled out the ten or fifteen letters, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, spread it on the ground, put in the letters and tied the four corners together, making a small bag.

The New York Store was set about two feet above the ground. A couple of steps led to the porch before the door. Red went to the end of the porch, stooped down, reached far in under, poked the small bundle out of sight, scraped up trash and loose dirt over it.

He backed out, got up, slapped his hands against his knees, knocking off the dust, then crouched forward, keeping quiet. He heard the clatter of hoofs.

A man on a leg-weary horse came round a corner down the street. He was lashing the weary horse; rode on by and stopped up the street a piece. The man got off and did not look to the left or right, but went indoors.

Red unbuckled his spurs, hung them on the saddle horn and started down the street. He edged up close to the door, looked, listened. It was a wooden door next to the dingy restaurant. Red stepped back a little, looked up. There was a light at the upstairs window. The door was unlocked, opened on to stairs. He stepped in and the door closed behind him making everything dead black.

He held his breath and stepped softly. Little squeaks under foot almost made him jump. He felt his way up an inch at a time with every nerve and muscle tense to go quietly.

At the top of the stairs was a small landing. Under the door was dim glow, as if the light came from another room, barely reached to this door.

He took a firm hold on the knob, moved it slowly. To his ears the slight metallic rasp seemed loud enough to make echoes and his heart skipped a beat when the lock clicked in release.

He inched the door open, and looked through. In the room beyond, a lamp with a china shade was on a table and threw a path of light through the doorway. Red

edged well over out of the light, moved forward, paused to listen. There were muffled, slight, indistinct movements, now and then a step.

He balanced himself on his toes, went slowly. The room seemed a half mile wide, was probably sixteen feet. He could, he thought, hear his own heart beat.

He got to the side of the lighted doorway, stooped low, peered. A front window was halfway up, and a breeze stirred the fringe of the cloth on the table.

The man's back was turned. Red stood up, stepped full in the door, stood there, made no noise, so his presence must have been sensed for the man twisted his head about, dropped the coat he was brushing, whirled with a pale hand going toward the ivory handled revolver high up on his belt; but the hand was jerked away as if the gun butt were too hot to touch.

"I'm listenin', gambler! Speak your piece!"

Boland's wax-like impassive face could for a moment show something like emotion. The look went away quicker than a little ripple in a still pool. "Why, Red, you gave me a scare!" The voice was smooth, cool, a smile even fringed the mouth's corners. His look searched Red's face, saw tense muscles, hot blue eyes, and the same set to the thin jaws that people always noticed wherever Red had to pick himself up off the ground and climb a bad horse again.

"Where's Sam?"

"In hell, I hope—and will be if ever I catch sight of him!"

"Most likely you will—in hell."

"You don't think that I let him get away? Why Red!" Boland moved a little nearer, half put out a hand with a stilted air of humbleness. It was just as if he had schooled himself to be so rigid and undemonstrative that he could not loosen up. "Sit down, Red; let me explain."

Red stood fast, not moving. "I hear good standing!"

Boland sat anyhow, laid an arm on the table, stroked his head with the other hand.

"We started for town here together from Dale's. Somehow Sam must have got to my saddle without my knowing. The cinch was loose. He simply galloped off and left me. He had the better horse. Was the better rider. I didn't know what to do. I cinched up, turned around and rode to Toyntons. They are bringing the bodies into town, Red. I heard you killed those men down at Suacks. That is fine!"

"You're a liar!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You didn't think me an' Pat would come back alive!"

"But, Red," the gambler moved his hand, turning it over with just about the manner of showing the hole card, "I hoped that you would kill those devils!"

"Did you tell 'em at Toyntons that I done that crime at Hendersons?"

That lifted the gambler out of his chair. He arose slowly, as blank of face as a dead man. "What are you saying?"

"Truth!"

"Red!"

"Sam Suack never had brains enough to think up that by hisself!"

"Think up what?"

"What he told here in town. You done it!"

"What?"

"Told him what to say!"

"But the Suacks and me are not friends, Red."

"Maybe you wanted to be friends. And maybe you are, anyhow! Like that colonel is! You and him are thick as two burrs and he an' the Suacks are in cahoots."

"Have you gone mad?"

"Purt-near!"

"Haven't I always shown that I liked you?"

Red's tongue was out from between his teeth in an instant, going full tilt:

"You're a gambler; that means a cheat! A cheat's a liar, allus. So you're a liar

an' a smart un. You're playin' a deep game. Me, I ain't smart. You've nudged and edged and poked me on to kill that Joe Dick—"

"Everything has been truth, Red."

"Shut up!" Red was thinking on his feet, throwing out the thoughts as they popped up. "You want to marry that Toynton girl—"

"You mad man!"

"You walk stiff-shouldered and play like a gent'man to make them Toyntons think well of you. I bet you never saved Will Toynton from crooked gamblers, like you said. An' how'd them Suacks know we had a telescope up there unless you told 'em? You seen it. An' they must've come in over the hills, around back. An' I wouldn't put it past you yourself to put-tin' Mendez up to kill the Toynton boy."

THE wax cracked on Boland's face. There was no play-acting about the way that hurt. He said, "Great God!" and had a look as if nearly choked. His glance skittered desperately from side to side and all about as if the sanest thing he could think was that he had been cornered by a mad man.

Red's tongue was still going. "There at Dale's you figgered me an' Pat, or me anyhow, would get killed, so you told Sam what to say to make it look like—"

"I swear to God, Red, no!"

"I don't care who you swear to. Maybe you ain't done ever'thing I 'magine. I ain't really accusin' you. I'm just expressin' my opinion of you. It don't much matter. I'm goin' to shoot you for what I know you've done! You put that story in Sam Suack's mouth an' you're goin' personal to tell the devil you an' him, an' Sam too, made one big mistake!"

Red's hand snapped back, a gun was out and over the holster, but Boland cried, "Red, in God's name!" and up went his hands. "Not—not in cold blood!"

"You got a knife, you got a gun, you got two hands!"

Boland was a gambler, cold as ice and as hard, but there was sweat on his pale faintly yellowish forehead. He took deep quick breaths and looked as if his backbone had wilted a little. He didn't glance at Red. The nearest he came to it was in the slant-wise stare he fixed for a moment on the gun's muzzle. He slowly brought his hands down and sat down, leaned his head against slim fingers, elbows on the table. He either had hopelessly reached the point where he did not care whether or not he was killed, or else with gambler cunning and judgment knew that Red just couldn't shoot a man that wasn't making a move in self defense.

Gambler-clever, he had guessed right. Red's gun slithered back, nose down, into the holster, and Red frowned, troubled.

"Not killin' Sam, like I ought've, there at Dale's brought on all this trouble. I oughta kill you, too. An' I'm goin' to!"

Boland stiffened slowly, his glance straight and level. "Red?" No answer except a tightened scowl. "I swear before God Almighty that I did not suggest to Sam Suack what—"

"You're a liar!"

Boland's hand fell on the table, jarred the light a little, then he nervously patted the table, thought deeply, looked up. His voice was calm, his eyes steady. "So be it! Go ahead, shoot me!"

It was Red's turn to fidget; then, "All right, get up and start goin' for your gun!"

Boland coolly said, "No," sat carefully quiet.

Red was really thinking out loud more than talking to Boland. "I gotta get outa town. I can't leave you and I won't take you. So they ain't nothin' for it but to shoot you. You just figger that—"

Boland stood up. "Listen, Red." He spoke earnestly in a low even voice that somehow did not sound entirely calm. "I am a gambler. Will die a gambler. I have been an honest gambler! Do you believe in God?" No answer. "Do you?" Red eyed

him wonderingly, made no reply. "Do you? Tell me!"

"I'm not that much of a damn fool. 'Course I do!"

"Very well. You are a brave honest gallant boy. You see, I have no hard feelings toward you, even now. Do you dare put it up to God Almighty?"

RED'S voice took on a troubled perplexity. "How you mean?"

"We will toss a coin. The man that calls the turn has the first shot. Could anything be fairer?" Boland put both hands into his pocket, straightened his shoulders. "Do you dare? Could anything be more fair? You call heads or tails, and I'll toss a dollar!"

Red hesitated, then. "All right, tails!"

Boland drew a dollar, but before he could toss it a voice right up close by in the dark of the next room said, "Take heads, Red! It's luckier!"

Red whipped about in a spinning turn, stepped back with a gun drawn and looked into the next room.

Zee Hill put himself out in the light that streaked through the doorway, smiled uneasily, had his hands shoulder high and flapped them, spoke quickly. "I heard voices up here—yours, an' come to—"

There was the click of the falling dollar on the carpet floor, not loud but loud enough for Red to hear. He looked aside and jumped as Matt Boland pulled the gun that was high on his belt and shot once, twice, three times. The little pearl-handled double-action gun could spit fire as fast as a man could wiggle a finger, but the yank of the hard-pull trigger made aiming bad and the third shot didn't count because it was fired a split tenth of a second after a long barreled .45 blasted a hole in the gambler's breast.

Matt Boland's waxy face seemed to open wide in full expression of tortured amazement. He sank down in a slow fall, caught himself a jerky moment on an elbow, then flattened out on the floor.

"Gosh," Red muttered, "maybe I was over hasty!"

Hill rubbed a sleeve up against his forehead. "I thought you were damnably slow!" And he added a long relieved, "Whew!"

"I mean maybe he didn't somehow put Sam up to that story! Why'd you say take heads thataway?"

Hill reached out with familiar impudence for the tobacco sack in Red's vest, fished a crumpled paper from his own pocket.

"Oh I don't know, only he seems to win at coin tossing, which ever you take."

"How'd you come to be up here?"

"Old Jack set up the drinks and let us out a while ago. I was on my way up to the print shop where Niblo let me have a pallet. I help him set type. That gives us both more time to drink. I heard voices—yours! Knew Boland lived up here. A newspaper man has to be nosey, so I took off my shoes."

He blew smoke through his nose and mouth, eyed the dollar that lay on the carpet where it had slipped through the gambler's hurried fingers as he let go of it to snatch his pearl handled gun. It lay head up.

Hill pointed. "See! Heads. You'd have won."

Hill stooped, picked up the dollar, tossed it in a spin to the table. The coin rang sound and clear, settled down, head up.

"There it is again, Red. I'll be damned!"

Hill picked up the dollar, turned it over. "What is all—?" He turned the dollar back and forth in his fingers. "Look here—head both sides. Has the ring of a perfectly good honest dollar, too!"

"And he told me solemn he'd never cheated in his life!"

"What's a lie to a cheat? Making his living at it, would he be likely to say that he did cheat? I'll bet he's got another dollar with tails on both sides."

"I don't care what he's got. This is enough."

"Let's go down and roust out Old Jack."

"No." Red blinked a little as if awakening. "I've got to be ridin'."

"To La Rez?"

"Yeah."

"You are a damn fool, Red."

"I ain't. When folks I don't like start lookin' for me, I'm the helpfullest man you ever seen!"

Red went out at a trot, skittered on the stairs, came stumbling to the bottom, and opened the street door, looked out into the cool grayish dawn.

SLIM the barn boss rolled out in his gray one-piece underwear, looked as skinny as a skinned rabbit, and almost fell on Red's neck, joyfully. "Hello, kid! I hear tell you an' Pat rode in on that bad bunch at Suack's an'—"

"You heard somethin' else, too, ain't you? That story Sam up and told about—"

Slim tossed back his head, patted Red's shoulder. "Supposin' a well known liar was to come and tell you he seen me beatin' a little kid to death, huh? Say!" Out came a sharp forefinger, poked Red in the ribs. "You know that Harve as was mixed up in the thing?"

"What about 'im?"

"That's what I'm tellin' you. Shut up an' listen. I'd washed an' was dobbin' axle grease on a mule's skinned knee over there in a stall when Harve rode in a few days ago about the time Matt Boland was ready to ride out. They 'peared acquainted an' sorta like they was expectin' to meet. I rared up an' took a look but they didn't see me, so I pulled my head down. Harve he said he'd got Boland's letter an' come. He laughed some an' asked the gambler if, like usual, he was makin' a fool outa some purty woman. I couldn't hear what the gambler said on account of you know how low he talks, an' calm-like. I did hear him mention Suack an' Bud Henderson's name—an' yourn. They rode out together an' I never give it no much of what you call a thought till last night when I couldn't sleep good for bein' sorta pleased by what you an' Pat done down to Suack's!"

"I'm gladder'n ever now that I just killed that gambler."

"You done w-what? Holy jumpin'—say, I'll be jiggerooed! Who you lookin' for next?"

"Sam Suack! Jim too!"

"They're over to La Rez."

"I know it. That's where I'm goin'. I want a horse. The best one here!"

"Best un? The best un 's Katy, Pete's miler. Pete keeps from havin' to work 'cause fool cowmen keep thinkin' they've got a horse at last can beat that long-legged grayhound with a hoss-face. 'Course, if you stick a gun under my nose an' say, 'Saddle 'er!' I can't he'p myself none; but Pete'll shore have a catfit, hop plumb up on the roof an' bite his own ears right off."

"Let 'im bite! Quick, I'm in a hurry."

RED rode out of Juilos as if he were not going to La Rez. He told Slim to help folks to think he had changed his mind. It was still so early in the morning not many people were astir.

With all day in which to get there, Red had plenty of time to ride wide of Juilos and get on the road. Twice that morning he left the road to avoid people. One was a freighter; the others were three or four men on horseback.

He came in sight of La Rez before noon, went back in the hills, unsaddled, staked out Katy, and slept.

He woke up late in the afternoon, smoked a few cigarettes, took up a couple of notches in his belt. Food meant a lot to Red when he could get it; when he couldn't, he didn't fret.

He went over and talked to Katy rubbed her silken nose, pressed his cheek against her warm soft lips, then looked all

about cautiously. He hadn't paid much attention to whether or not anybody who suspected him of the crime at Henderson's came upon him; but he didn't want any-

body to catch him in such foolishness as rubbing noses with a horse.

As soon as it was dark he rode down to La Rez, stopped at a little candle-lit Mexican hovel on the outskirts. Red went to the door on foot, his hat in one hand, reins in the other. Brown little flower-eyed kids poked their noses out from behind the bedraggled skirts of a fat woman.

"Senora, may I have water for this beautiful horse? As you can see, this is the racing mare of Senor Jones of Juilos, and it is not to be known, but I am giving her some roadwork in training for her next race."

The senora quite likely had some of the most gallant and chivalrous knights of Old Spain among her more remote ancestors, though she knew nothing of them; but—as Red very well knew—whether merely Indian, or richly Spanish blooded, she loved horses that won races, and could not be otherwise than gracious to polite strangers whom God sent to her door; so she came waddling out and led the way around back where there was a well with a bucket on a rope.

Red pulled up water while the kids cuddled Katy's legs, pressed their heads against her flanks and sang her praises. The senora and a boy of about twelve brought handsful of fresh grass.

When Katy merely splashed her nose playfully in the water, Red knew that she had had her fill. He drew fresh water, took a gourd dipper, drank.

He explained in rippling Spanish that it was ever so much best that the people of La Rez not know that the horse was being given roadwork; still, there were some things up town that needed to be done, and could Jose, the twelve years old, come along and do them?

The senora with smiles and headshakes drew back from the dollar he offered but, being pressed, as she knew she would be if this gringo had worthy manners, accepted.

Much *pinole* for small hungry mouths may be purchased with a dollar.

Red went over behind the blacksmith shop where it was dark, nobody was about, and he sat on the ground to await the return of the barefooted deer-legged boy that had galloped up town.

Red murmured to Katy, "If you don't win your next race, they'll be one Mexican fam'ly in La Rez as won't have a stitch to their backs. You hear me? And if I'm still in this country, they'll be one handsome cowboy in the same pickle!"

Katy pointed her ears inquisitively at him, flung up her head with a perky sidetoss.

He looked at the horse. "It's plumb funny," Red mused, "how you women are all alike, whether you wear skirts or four-legged horsehide. Even girl-pups is different." He took up a stick and idly drew on the ground lines that he could not see in the darkness. He did not have the word equipment to put his feeling into thought, but he sensed the characteristic femininity that runs true to sex through humans and brutes. "Um-hm." He tossed the stick away, thinking of the most stubbornly untamable outlaw horses, the fiercest dogs. "But when they're bad, they're worse'n us men know how to be."

Jose, breathless, came running. He had asked questions, listened, looked, ranging through the town as a thoroughbred pointer noses among brush piles. He

dropped to his knees in the dirt before Red, scrouged up close, talked fast.

Senor Jim Suack and the Senor Sheriff Marcher, and the Senor Somebody-or-other, had gone that morning toward Juilos to find and hang that terrible monstrous ugly man Clark who had killed so many inoffensive harmless men and a woman. "May the good God quickly put him into hell!" said the small Joe.

"You bet," Red agreed, "if he's done anything like that!"

The Senor Sam Suack and the Senora Ama Suack were at the hotel. One was in the barroom; the other was upstairs where 'Nita, who was Jose's cousin and worked at the hotel, said the senora was sick.

The boy took the dollar Red gave him, hugged Katy, told her he was going to save it to bet on her next race, and went galloping home.

Chapter XIII

TOTING SAM ALONG

RED tied Katy in the deepest shadows he could find in the alley behind the hotel, slipped to the back of the barroom, looked in. Sam Suack was there, fingering whiskey at the bar. Other men were about, just a few, not acting very sociable toward the scar-faced Sam. Red peered and mused and the impulse to walk in, give Sam hell, and kill him; but it wouldn't be like Sam to reach for a gun.

"Well then," Red reflected, "I oughta have a horse out back here to drag him to and put 'im on. I'd like to take that woman, too. Tellin' we lined men up an' shot 'em! What makes people wanta be like that for?"

He went around the block to the street, looked up and down for horses; knew that if things came out all right he would be more than forgiven for having "borrored" a couple of horses; "and if they don't, stealin' a couple of horses will be what they call mighty minor!"

Six or seven saddled horses were ranged here and there at hitching racks on both sides of the street. There was scarcely anybody about. He didn't know, but most of the men with nothing to do were down at the depot, as usual, to watch the train come in, see who got off, who got on.

Red went up to a couple of horses, looked them over, looked up and down the street.

The horses were tied with ropes. He knotted the reins of one over its neck, slipped the ropes, coiled one, and had his hand on the horn ready to swing into the saddle when a voice drawled slow and steady:

"Sure you ain't makin' a little mistake, Red?"

Red turned, faced the tall dark Glaine who seemed to pop up always near when Red didn't expect him. Glaine did not have his hand anywhere near a gun.

"Yeah. I reckon, a little un. I come for them Suacks an' I gotta have a couple horses, extry!"

"Jim Suack ain't here. Then you mean to take the woman?"

"Why you reckon she lied about me an' Pat thataway?"

"Prob'ly," said the impassive Glaine, "because she figgered folks would think she was lyin' if she told the truth. She can't afford to have folks think she don't hate you. What do you mean to do with her?"

"I don't exactly know. Take her to Old Jack, I reckon. Let 'im get out his shotgun, hold another sorta court."

"You maybe don't know there is a posse down yonder for you?"

"'T won't be much of a posse if it's layin' around Juilos waitin' for me to come in."

Glaine came up a little closer. "Word's come that you shot that gambler."

"He shore needed shootin'!"

"But he isn't dead."

"He ain't? Then I'd better get me some bigger bullets!"

"Some kind of vermin are hard to kill, Red."

"You know 'im? I mean know he's a varmint?"

Glaine said, "Some, a lot. Now supposin', Red, I sort of throw in with you. Give you a little help. Will you promise me something?"

"What?"

"You wouldn't hurt the woman, I know. So promise me that if you run into any kind of a fight, you'll let Sam get away without taking a shot at him. And if you do get him to Juilos, you'll turn him over to Old Jack? Will you?"

"Why ought I not shoot 'im?"

"I know how you feel. But I am a little interested in keepin' him alive—for a few days."

"You got somethin' agin 'im?"

"In a way. I'd like to see him turned over to Old Jack for a time. If you promise, Red, I'll not only let you take our horses here, but I'll do a little something toward helping you get started."

"Why you doin' it?"

"Maybe," said Glaine with something like a smile, "because I like you. And I wouldn't be very liable to like you, would I, if I believed what some people are trying to say they believe, the which I don't believe they do."

The good looking boy Curly came from across the street. He looked at Red. Some wonder showed on Curly's face in the starlight, but he said "Howdy," to Red and grinned; then to Glaine, "There hasn't been a word come yet."

Glaine said, "Son, you just go along back to the depot and set tight. Something will. Red here is borrowin' our horses, saddles too, so we'll have to skirmish around for some more. He's come, like he said he would, for the Suacks."

Curly grinned. "Don't you worry, Red. Things'll come out." To Glaine, "All right. I'll go back and set there till I grow whiskers. I can't imagine what's happened to my Dad!"

CURLY went back the way he had come. Glaine walked around into the hotel's alley with Red, taking the horses.

"Now, Red, I'll get Sam out here for you and set him on a horse, all ready to go. You do like I tell you, and you won't have much trouble with that woman—if you don't let her kiss you."

"That ain't likely, feller!"

"Go up the back way to her room. It's on the left next to the front. You tell her Matt Boland ain't quite dead, and if she wants to see him alive to come a runnin'."

"What good'll that do?"

"Try it and see. Only look out she don't make love to you. Take Curly. He's going to grow into a mighty smart man. For one thing, he's got a smart sensible father, like you had. Down at the ranch, she picked Curly for to flirt with. When nobody was looking. He was with her when that Harve rode in. Matt Boland sent him down. She is up there now and don't know Boland has been shot because nobody has took the trouble to tell her. Me and Curly are about the only ones here that know she would much care. Tell 'er he ain't dead—"

"He oughta be, I hit him square in the breast!"

"His heart's no bigger'n a peanut and hard as rock. Easy missed."

"Gosh! How you know so much?"

"Knowing about that gambler, I've made my business. I hope he don't die. I want to hang him. And nobody ever hated you much more than he does."

"I suspicioned somethin' was the matter with him, all along."

"You killed his brother. A gambler just like him. There in Tulluco."

"Well then why the hell didn't he do somethin' about it instead of fussin' around pretendin' he was trying to be friendly?"

"He figgered it was safer. He's a sure-thing gambler! 'Twas him, Red, had Mendez kill that Toynton boy."

"How you know all that?"

"I told you knowing about that gambler was a part of my business. He tried to make a deal with Will to marry the Toynton girl by getting Joe Dick what he called out of the way. The boy said for him to go to hell; that it was better she married even a fellow like Dick. How I know? Will Toynton told me!" He gave Red a push. "Now get along!"

RED went up the back way by outside stairs and into the hall. It had a dusty smell mixed with bad coal oil. A Mexican girl was turning down the smoked bracketed lamp that would be left burning with a thread of light during the night to light late comers to their rooms.

Red asked her, just to show that he had business, where Senora Suack's room was, and the girl showed him.

He knocked two or three times before a weary voice said, "What do you want, Sam?"

"This ain't Sam. This is Red Clark. Matt Boland he has been bad hurt and a fellow said for me to come."

The door opened wide. Ama Suack was as touseled as if she had been in a fight with another woman, and hair had been pulled. She had been crying and the room was full of cigarette smoke.

"Matt?" Her eyes gleamed at Red but it was an impersonal sort of gleam, as if her bright stare were fixed on things far away. "W-was he shot?"

"Yes'm."

"Who done it?" she asked in such a tense, savage ready-to-pounce sort of way that Red felt that man Glaine was pretty smart; this woman did love that gambler. "Who done it, Red?" She caught hold of him, gave jerky shakes.

"Some cowboy."

"Gambling?"

"In a way I reckon. 'Pears like Matt had a silver dollar with heads on both sides an'—"

"Will he die? Do you think he will die? Where was he shot? Oh what will I do." She worked her hands together, clasping and unclasping them.

"I got a horse down there for you."

"Oh!" She gave Red a jerk that was more forceful than could be expected of a woman who wasn't big. It took him by surprise so that he was in the room before he knew he was going. She was saying, "Come in here while I dress," as she banged the door shut.

He said, "Good gosh, but I oughtn't to stay in—"

"Oh, who cares? I don't! Why should you? Oh Matt, Matt! Set down there."

He more or less stumbled backwards into a chair. "I won't be but a minute! Where is he now? Is Dr. Rand with him?" She asked questions fast and did not wait for answers. "It was sweet of you to come, Red." Ama was pawing among the clothes that were scattered about on the bed and chairs.

"Why you want to tell that lie about me?"

Ama straightened up, her face blankly innocent and mystified. "What do you mean, Red?" Honey couldn't have been sweeter, dripped more smoothly.

"Sayin' me an' Pat lined them men up at the ranch an' shot 'em!"

Instantly, "I never!" More emphatically, "Oh I never!" In hurt astonishment, "Why would I say a thing like that?" Now anger-toned, "Who says I said it? Red, who says I said that?"

Red twisted his hat brim, crossed his feet, uncrossed them. "That saloon man you set with in the stage from Dale's Place!"

"Oh the dirty liar! I never! You couldn't, simply couldn't believe I'd say a thing like that? What I maybe did say was that you killed them just as quick as if you did have them lined up against a fence and the old fool twisted—" She came at Red with a quick little rush of feet, bent toward him. Her face was fiercely distorted. "Do you know what they are saying of you? Sam and Jim and Joe Dick? Do you know that they are saying you——"

Red's head jerked in little hasty nods. He swallowed, wet his lips. He didn't want to hear that thing said again.

"What are you going to do about it?" Ama's face was near his, her voice questioned and taunted, too. She, not waiting, gave him his answer with tense working of lips. "You ought to kill them!"

"They don't believe I done it! An' you'd better hurry up. Matt is badly hurt."

Reminded, she swished away. The man she loved was dying, but she took the lamp from the table and set it on the varnished pine dresser before the looking glass.

That somehow made Red mad. He hated the gambler and he didn't like her, and he wouldn't put much of anything past either of them; but this primping when her lover was dying some eighteen miles away riled him down deep; and, just because he thought it would serve her right to be jolted, he blurted:

"You know, of course, he was fixin' to marry the Toynton girl?"

"Who?" She had no more interest than curiosity. "Joe Dick?" Her hands were in her black hair at the back of her head.

"Matt Boland was!"

Ama whirled as if whipped around by a top string. "That's a lie!"

Red shrugged a shoulder, fiddled with his hat brim, met her eyes. "I ain't goin' to argy."

"That's a lie, I tell you!" She was almost on top of him, ready to scratch. He stopped fiddling with the hat, drew his feet back under the chair, sat motionless, grinned a little. It was a nervous grin but to her amazed jealousy it must have seemed a little pitying. "Why do you look like that? Why do you say that?" She shook his shoulder. "Answer me!" She drew a full breath through an open mouth, "Oh that's a lie!"

"Why are you so plumb sure?"

"Why are you?"

"Why else did he have Will Toynton killed then?" Red snapped.

"That little fool was killed because he was snooping and meddling with people's business down here, and finding out things about Jim Suack and Mendez and writing letters; that's why?"

"An' you, I bet, made your husband think he was snoopin' and meddlin' with you?"

"I didn't know he would kill the boy! I didn't. Honest I didn't."

"Was the colonel in on it?"

"I don't know. Matt hated that colonel, too. He hasn't played fair with Matt about —well, something!"

"How it come," Red asked, "if you love that gambler, you go an' marry Jim Suack all of a sudden?"

Ama's laugh was a shriek. "If anything happened to Jim, then what?" Red, not a squeamish boy, wiped his forehead, felt shivery. Her fury-foolish tongue clattered on. "And *you* are the one Matt wanted to see dead more than anybody else in this country! Don't you know you killed his brother there in Tulluco? He would have done anything to get even. But don't ever tell I told you, Red?" She bent close to him, put a hand to his cheek.

There was a knock at the door. Ama turned with a start, and Red stood up, expecting anything. The door opened. Glaine's long arm pushed it wide; his hand held to the knob. His voice was low and clear: "I come to say you'd better be hurryin'!"

Glaine gave the door a push, swung it wide. He stepped to one side, waited.

They went out, passed him. Ama took hold of Red's arm, hung on as they hurried in the hall. She held to him as if she liked touching him.

SAM SUACK, with an empty holster on his hip, was in the saddle and his legs were tied under the horse's belly. The boy Curly held the reins, also held a revolver. Evidently whatever word Curly had been waiting for down at the depot had come.

When Sam saw Red he made blubbery sounds and tried to fall out of the saddle; then he doubled over and hunched down as if his backbone had snapped.

"Help 'er on," said Glaine to Curly and took the reins of Suack's horse. To Red, "I maybe ain't doin' right lettin' you do things thisaway. But I'm still old-fashioned, some, in my notions of how things oughta be done. I sort of figger you've got some rights to take him. Better put your rope on Sam's horse an' keep it taut or he'll let it slip off. Mind now, what you've promised. You turn Sam here over to Old Jack. He'll be kept a whole lot safer than if he's turned over to that red-nosed sheriff. An', kid, do you want to know what it is that gambler feels Joe Dick ain't played fair about?"

"Gosh A'mighty, how you know how she talked?"

"I got ears. I carry 'em around an' prop 'em up where I figger I'm most likely to hear things. It was Matt Boland got hold of Bill Toynton's secret, and him and Joe Dick sorta went into cahoots with it; but Joe Dick, one way and another, hasn't shared up like the gambler feels he ought."

"How you know all about everything, so much?"

"For one reason an' another the Toynton boy liked me. An' mind now, if you let that Ama woman kiss you——"

"You ain't talkin' good sense!"

"Well she's kissed Curly over there a few times, an' he ain't been the same since. Her lips are bad poison; but pleasant to take, I reckon!"

Red put his rope on Sam's horse, then cut the reins close up to the bit. "Now maybe he won't be in no sweat to get my rope off his horse."

As they rode off, Glaine took Curly by the arm, guided him into the saloon through the back door.

"Your dad he may be mad at the way I've played this hand; but a boy like Red has got him a right to do things sorta high-handed and crazy. He's honest! Be better for this country, all countries, I reckon, if honest men was a little crazier instead of settin' and waitin' for some pie-eyed red-nosed worthless sheriff to 'tend to things. But I reckon Law and Order will come to this country tomorrow about the time the freight gets in."

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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